

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Stunning Priorities of Jesus' Kingdom

(Studies in the Gospel of Luke)

Think Small

(Luke 13:18-21)

Study #8

Introduction: For the love of a good story...

I love stories. So do you, and so did Jesus. We call the stories Jesus told "parables"¹ and the Gospels² record dozens of His parables.

These stories all revolve around the themes of ordinary first century life: home life, finance, or agriculture. With a little background information thrown in, you and I can fully appreciate the parables, too, twenty-one centuries later.

It is tempting to view parables as children's stories - and, yes, children do love them!

Parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers delight to tell parables to children. Maybe you learned some of the parables when you were young from home or church.

But, at some point along the way, as you grow up, you found that the parables grew up with you.

¹ Our English word "*παραβολή*" is a transliteration of the Greek word "*parabole*" which simply means "to place beside, to cast alongside." A parable is a story that places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching.

² The parables are all found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). John includes no parables.

They are more than bedtime stories to help you go to sleep. They are calls to all alert readers of all ages to wake up.

Parables are stories that put spiritual truth into everyday street language. They are both windows and mirrors. As mirrors, they help us see ourselves; as windows, they help us understand life and God.

Of course, parables can be tough to understand - and that is by design. Jesus intended that we would work hard to understand them.

He made them puzzling and mysterious on purpose. And for those who are willing to dig, the parables are gold mines of spiritual treasure.

When we grasp the point of any one of Jesus' parables, it packs a wallop. It changes the way we view God and life. It changes us.

We're thinking in these weeks about the stunning priorities of Jesus' kingdom.

As King, He behaves differently than the rulers of other kingdoms. He enlists those we would never have thought of to serve in His kingdom. His kingdom serves those that most of society overlooks.

Today we are looking at two of Jesus' parables. They are two of His shortest ones and they both highlight just how different Jesus' kingdom is from other kingdoms.

We find them in Luke 13 and they both answer the question, "*What is 'THE KINGDOM OF GOD' like?*"³

About God's kingdom...

The theme of "The Kingdom of God" is all over the Bible. God's kingdom is mentioned hundreds of times from Genesis to Revelation.

³ Also, Matthew 13 and (for one of them), Mark 4.

And, at its most basic, the kingdom of God, like an earthly kingdom, is the realm ruled by God.

The king of Denmark and the king of Jordan rule over their realms. God rules and reigns over His.

In the absolute sense, the universe and all it contains is under the rule and reign of God. He is the Sovereign over everything. He is the KING of Kings.

But in both the Old and New Testaments there is a particular sense in which God's realm is that portion of humanity over which God is actively ruling and reigning.

In the Old Testament, God's kingdom was located in the nation of Israel. God reigned over His people. He was Israel's King even when she had her own human king. And a big part of Israel's kingdom stewardship was to export God's reign to the rest of the world.

In these New Testament times, God's kingdom rule is exercised over the Body of Christ, the church. We invite His rule and reign over our church, and we gladly submit to His rule. And as it was Israel's stewardship to expand God's reign on earth in Old Testament times, so today, God has given us the same assignment.

Today we listen as Jesus gives two parables about God's kingdom and its expansion.

The context is intriguing...

Context for the two parables...

Luke records these two parables right after telling us about one of Jesus' miracles. (Luke 13:10-17)

He had been teaching in a Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath when He noticed a woman there who was suffering from a long-standing sickness (eighteen years). Her sickness forced her to be bent over. She couldn't stand up straight.

Jesus knew that a demonic spirit was the cause of her sickness. Luke records no prelude. Jesus simply told her, **[Luke 13:12] "Woman, you are freed from your sickness."**

He then laid His hands on her, and she immediately was able to stand up straight. Of course, she also immediately began praising God for her healing.

Sadly, there was a downside to this wonderful event because not everybody was ecstatic about this woman's release from her bondage. The synagogue leader scolded Jesus for having done the "work" of healing on the day of Sabbath rest.

Jesus scolded him right back and said that the Sabbath was the perfect day for bringing her the healing she had needed.

And the scene ends with this: **[17] And as He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him.**

This miracle fits the pattern of many of Jesus' miracles and it definitely shows the power of God to make impact.

But, it was a miracle performed in a non-descript place (**"[Luke 13:10]... one of the synagogues**), for the benefit of one person, and she was a non-elite member of society.

It would have been a wonderful miracle for the woman and for those who loved her. But anybody who wanted Jesus to make a Messianic splash might have questioned if it was, well, worth it.

This miracle didn't leave behind a wake. It wouldn't make much of a difference in the grand scheme of things. Wouldn't increase His popularity nation-wide, wouldn't be the tipping point that would take King Jesus to the throne.

And so many of Jesus' miracles were like this. He would heal one leper, one blind person, cast out a demon from one demoniac. And then He would often tell people not to say a word about it.

Some people might have said, *“This is no way to build a kingdom.”*

Then, Jesus told these two parables.

My Bible starts off the next verse with *“So...”* A better translation would be, *“Therefore...”*⁴

These two parables are given in answer to observers who might have thought that this demonstration of power was a waste, a miracle unworthy of kingdom-building.

A Parable of Surprising Growth (Luke 13:18-19)

[18] So He was saying, “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? [19] It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the sky nested in its branches.”

The Parable as Story

The gardener

The elements of this parable are simple. There is a gardener and he throws mustard plant seeds into his garden plot.

Normally, mustard seeds were planted in open fields. But Jesus has this guy planting mustard in his family garden. His only role in the parable is to set things in motion by sowing seed.

The mustard seed and plant

Then, of course, there is the mustard plant seed.

When we read this parable in Matthew and Mark, Jesus makes reference to the mustard seed being very, very small.⁵

⁴ The Greek has the word *“oun”* (οὖν) - usually translated “therefore”, signifying that what follows logically comes after what has preceded.

Luke doesn’t call attention to the size of the seed, but in the ancient world it was a proverb that something very small was *“as small as a mustard seed.”*

So, the mustard seed is very small. But the mustard plant grows into a substantial plant.

The mustard plant grows to be a bush, usually about four feet tall. But in the Middle East it can grow to heights of 9-10 feet. No, it isn’t a towering oak, but Jesus wasn’t off the mark to call it a tree.

The birds

And then there are the birds.

Birds aren’t normally appreciated in gardens. (They are famous for eating veggies in my garden.) Here, though, they are welcomed to perch on the branches of the mustard tree, which easily hold them.⁶

And that’s the story. But it’s more than a story.

According to Jesus, the story of the mustard’s seed growth from tiny to tall is a sermon about the expansion of God’s kingdom.

The Parable as Sermon

The kingdom of God ends BIG!

The end of the story is that the kingdom of God ends up BIG.

The image that gets this idea across is that of a tree big enough to support and to shade and to house birds.⁷

⁵ Even with Matthew’s and Mark’s comments, I don’t think it is necessary to say that Jesus’ was declaring that the mustard seed is the smallest seed of all the plants in the world. It was famously small.

⁶ See Ezekiel 17:22-24 for a picture of a cedar tree sprouting from a sprig, becoming a comfortable place to dwell. Psalm 104:12 refers positively to birds finding shelter in trees and Jesus speaks positively of birds in the Sermon on the Mount by mentioning God’s care of them.

It isn't a surprise that Jesus wants us to think of God's kingdom as something big. But the POINT of the parable is not how big God's kingdom gets. The point is how small it is when it begins.

The kingdom of God starts SMALL.

The mustard seed is of insignificant size when compared to most of the seeds I plant in my garden.

Bean and squash seeds are way bigger than a mustard seed. But the mustard plant ends up much bigger than a bean plant.

God's kingdom work begins small, puny, seemingly insignificant, and it grows surprisingly large.

Who would have ever thought, looking at the mustard seed, that it would grow to be a tree of such size and substance?⁸

That is the way of the expansion of the kingdom of God. And we could play this "Who would have ever thought" game all day long.

Who would have ever thought...

The story of Jesus

Who would have ever thought that Jesus of Nazareth would end up being the most significant Person to have ever lived?

He grew up in the backwards, backwoods province of Galilee and didn't appear in public until age thirty. He taught for about three years, mostly in the rural villages of an oppressed people.

⁷ Judaism frequently imagined the growth of a kingdom by means of a tree. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian kingdom was pictured as a towering tree (Daniel 4). Ezekiel pictured Assyria as a tall cedar (Ezekiel 31). The kingdom of God is depicted as a huge tree in Psalm 80.

⁸ Some see in this parable that Jesus was imagining Gentiles finding rest in God's kingdom, portrayed by the birds nesting in the mustard plant's branches.

Only on rare occasions did He go to the big city of Jerusalem and He never went to the larger Roman cities of Tiberias or Sepphoris, let alone, to Rome, where people went who wanted to make names for themselves.

He performed miracles, but again, mostly in out-of-the-way villages. He mostly shunned the spotlight. He made a few converts, most of whom were poor and uneducated and very few of whom were wealthy or well-connected.

He made enemies of the rich and powerful, was arrested, condemned, and then died the shameful death of crucifixion, having been rejected by His own people.

And today, hundreds of millions of people around the world have entrusted their eternal souls to the care of Jesus and give their whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus, the living Lord.

Anyone observing the relatively obscure life of Jesus, who knew His rag-tag band of disciples, and who had seen His puny beginnings, would have never dreamed that they were seeing the start of something big. But that's exactly what was happening.

And this "who would have ever thought" dynamic is actually the pattern of God's kingdom work.

The pattern of God's plan throughout Scripture

Who would have ever thought that out of the genealogy of the despised Moabite people would come a woman, Ruth, who would marry a Jew named Boaz and that they would produce a son who would be in the line of King David?

Who would have ever thought that God would bring about a great Jewish victory under the leadership of General Gideon but only AFTER Gideon's army had been reduced from 22,000 to 300 soldiers?

Who would have ever thought, after denying Jesus three times, that less than two months later, Simon Peter would become a bold

spokesman for Jesus and that God's kingdom would expand exponentially on the Day of Pentecost through Peter's testimony?

And on and on we could go, multiplying stories like these. The point of the parable of the mustard seed is that God takes the small and apparently insignificant and turns it into something weighty.

An act may seem trivial and mundane, but God may just use that act to advance His kingdom. A person may have an entirely inauspicious start, but by God's grace, may have a great and glorious God-honoring end.

You!!

Who would have ever thought that your regular prayers for neighbors would result in opportunities to share Jesus with them?

Who would have ever thought that your love for your wife or your love for your husband would speak so powerfully to them about God's love that God would open their heart to His grace through you?

Who would have ever thought that your regular time in Scripture and in prayer would produce a character that honors Jesus?

Who would have ever thought that leading your children in the ways of Jesus would result in two or three or more generations of Christ-followers in your family tree?

Who would have ever thought that your painful, wounded life or your tragic past decisions would be exactly what God would use to redemptively draw attention to His life-changing ways?

And about that brief time you gave to listen to someone, that little bit of help you gave to someone in need. Don't worry about the size of the gesture.

God will grow your mustard seed sized act of love or your quiet word about Jesus into something glorious. THAT'S the kingdom way.

And then, immediately after that story, Jesus told another parable with a similar, but slightly different, point.

A Parable of Unobtrusive Impact (13:20-21)

[20] And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? [21] It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of flour until it was all leavened."

The Parable as Story

The woman

In that first parable a man sowed the seed of a mustard plant. In this one, a woman did what women did every day in Israel. She took leaven and put it into a large lump of unleavened dough.

This woman fulfilled the same function as the mustard seed sower did in the first parable. She's not the point of the story. She appears simply to apply the leaven.

The flour

Then, there is the flour in which she "hid" the leaven.

It turns out that she's working with a pretty big lump of dough.

Sources I checked said that three *sata* would have been enough to have fed well over a hundred people. It's about fifty pounds of flour.⁹

But that lump just sat there. It wasn't mouth-watering and it sure wasn't fork-ready. It needed help. It needed leaven.

The leaven

There are several leavening agents around - biological, chemical and even mechanical.

⁹ A "sata" is a dry measure equaling about eight quarts, thus she was dealing with twenty-four quarts of doughy material.

Best known to us, though, is baker's yeast, which we add to an unleavened lump of dough to start off the process of turning the lump into a loaf.

The cook kneads the dough and works the leaven into the lump - and then leaves the leaven to do its work. Nobody sees the leaven at work. It works invisibly, inside the lump.

In the ancient world, the homemaker would prepare the dough late in the day and leave the leavening bread untouched and unobserved overnight. Then, in the morning - *Voila!* - she had bread!

Leaven had permeated the whole lump of dough, unobserved and invisibly.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like leaven as it works its way into a lump of dough.

It is true that in lots of places in the Bible, leaven is used as a symbol of evil and sin. It often is used as a picture of how sin wiggles its way into our lives and poisons everything it touches.¹⁰

That is not the point here.

Here, Jesus is using the everyday work of leavening a lump of dough to positively picture the unobtrusive advance of God's kingdom as it permeates families and circles of friends and even whole societies.

The Parable as Sermon

Kingdom progress is unobtrusive.

Leaven works silently and invisibly. It doesn't draw attention to itself. It works behind the scenes, in the shadows.

And that, by and large, is how God's kingdom advances.

I'm grateful to the Billy Grahams of the world. I really am. God has used large scale evangelism wonderfully through the centuries.

I'm grateful for large conferences, like the Challenge conference that our teenagers attend with the Free Church every couple of years.

I've attended conferences - and maybe you have, too - where we stand with hundreds or thousands of others and have mountain-top experiences of worship in a large group setting.

I'm grateful for large gatherings of Christians on Sunday mornings - and you should know that large is relative.

In San Antonio, "large" is thousands, but in many places "large" is hundreds. And in some places where I've been, "large" is dozens. It's great when large numbers come together to learn and to be inspired.

But the reality is that most of the soul-shaking, life-changing kingdom of God work done in people's hearts is done small, quietly, and unobtrusively.

- God's Spirit breaks through when a few friends get real with each other, they seek Him together, they confess sins to each other.
- It happens often in a one-on-one setting where the talk switches from sports or the weather to the soul.
- God touches your soul when you turn to Him in a quiet moment of prayer and reflection.

This, too, is the pattern of God's kingdom advance.

Jesus was born in an obscure Bethlehem stable and He died on a dark Friday afternoon. This is God's way. He prefers to advance His kingdom away from the limelight.

Behind those who lead from up front, God works behind the scenes. He works through those who work behind the scenes. He even works through those who work behind those who work behind the scenes.

¹⁰ While most references to leaven in the Bible are negative, such as requiring unleavened bread in most sacrifices, in Leviticus 7:13 and Amos 4:5, reference is made to sacrifices offered to God from leavened bread.

He is the One who leavens conversations with truth. He is the One who leavens acts of love with grace. He leavens gifts of mercy performed in His name so that, at the end of the day, a life is changed.

The Kingdom of God advances silently. But its progress is unmistakable and undeniable.

Kingdom's impact is undeniable

At the end of time, the whole lump will be leavened and God will reign as recognized King over all. In the end, God wins.

A little bit of leaven goes a looong way. The woman in the parable would not have had to use much leaven, even on that huge lump of dough. Just a little bit of leaven is enough. Without fail, the leaven wins. It always conquers the dough.

Leaven always wins over the dough. You can tell that the leaven has been there. In the morning, the whole lump has been impacted.

Rest in that. Trust that. Your faithful leavening for Jesus almost certainly won't have the exact impact you imagine. But it will have an impact.

It won't just sit there.

God will use your leavening work of service and love and prayer in ways you would never have dreamed to change you, to change your friend, to arouse opposition, to effect hardening, to bring about softening. That's what leaven does.

Conclusion:

So, what are the things that get noticed today? The quick and the big.

We reserve headlines for the fast-growing business and the flashy A-lister, the stock that rises like a meteor, and the "it's all about me" athlete.

The kingdoms of this world have always applauded the splashy, flashy kick-off. Grand openings and initial public offerings and spectacular launches are the stock in trade of business today.

But the wisdom of God has always known better than to put confidence in a successful launch. Ecclesiastes says, **[7:8] *The end of a matter is better than its beginning.***¹¹

The biggest news out there is the advance of God's kingdom. It may not lead on anybody's newsfeed - now. It will one day.

And the funny thing, as we've seen today, is that Jesus meant for it to be that way.

We'll have more to say about this in a few weeks, but despite someone's obscurity or a family's setbacks or the small size of a church, because of the principle of the mustard seed and the leaven, its impact can be disproportionate to its size.

God might use your mustard seed-sized investments in friendships to produce fruit beyond anything you could have imagined.

And He might use your behind the scenes leavening of love and truth and prayer to bring about change while no one is watching.

The kingdom of God may well have a puny beginning and it often works in the shadows. But, according to Jesus, it will have a glorious end.

So, think small, friends. God will take your small service/gift/prayer and use it to advance His kingdom reign and rule.

¹¹ What project ever began with more promise and failed more spectacularly than the Tower of Babel?