

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Think Small

(Luke 13:18-20)

Introduction: Change theory...

I don't remember when I first heard someone say, "*The gift of seeing problems is a cheap gift.*" - but it instantly rang true.

It is true that brokenness is everywhere. No matter where we look, we see wreckage.

And this reality is not unique to 2025. It is the world's status quo. There is always something wrong with everything.¹

But there's no benefit to simply observing or making fun of problems. Neither cynicism nor complaint helps.

The "*cheap gift*" of seeing problems isn't a helpful gift at all.

Changing what's wrong is the thing. Bringing healing to brokenness and fixing the wreckage - that is what breathes a breath of hope into a broken world and into broken people.

And we (to quote a very old song) would love to change the world. Being God change agents is what we're made for...but in this we may feel sort of "stuck."

We don't know quite what to do. So much of what we care about the most is out of our control, above our pay grade, too big.

¹ As counselor Larry Crabb once said, "*If we ever think that we have made it back to Eden, we're fooling ourselves.*"

So, to all of us who are frustrated with the world's and with life's brokenness and are at a loss as to what to do...Jesus has an idea.

We're turning to Luke's gospel this morning to think our way through two of Jesus' shortest parables. Both of these parables help us understand the ways and the workings of God's kingdom.²

When Jesus gave these two parables, He was answering the question, "*What is the kingdom of God like?*"

About God's kingdom...

A kingdom consists of a realm over which a king rules and reigns.

The king of Denmark rules Denmark. The king of Jordan rules Jordan and the people of Jordan. The kingdom of God is the realm over which God rules and reigns.

Look through the Bible and you'll find hundreds of references to God's kingdom, from Genesis to Revelation.

Now, 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 when we turn to either the Old or the New Testament, there is a narrowing of God's realm of ruling. He actively rules and reigns over a portion of humanity.

In the Old Testament, God's kingdom was the nation and the people of Israel. God reigned over His people.

He was Israel's KING even when she had her own human king.

² See Matthew 13 for both of these; see Mark 4 for the parable of the mustard seed.

And a big part of Israel's kingdom stewardship was to live in such a way that others would also want to live under God's rule and reign.

These days, God's kingdom rule is exercised within the Body of Christ, the church.

We who believe in Jesus are to invite His rule and reign over our church. We are Jesus' subjects. We aspire to 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.

By evangelism, disciple-making, and by meeting needs in Jesus' Name, we invite more and more people to receive the gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus and to then experience His abundance by living under Jesus' authority.

Jesus explains God's kingdom and its expansion by these two parables. The context in which we find these parables is intriguing.

Context for the two parables... (Luke 13:10-17)

Jesus had been teaching in a Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath day when He noticed a woman there who was suffering from a long-standing - eighteen long years! - physical ailment.

He knew that this ailment was due to the work of an evil spirit. She was **[Luke 13:11]...bent over double, and could not straighten up at all.**

Luke records no prelude to the healing. 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 healing. Not everybody was ecstatic about this woman's release from her bondage.

The synagogue leader scolded the woman and the crowd for having sought the "work" of healing on the day of Sabbath rest.

He said, **[14] "There are six days during which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day."**

Jesus scolded him right back and said that the Sabbath was the perfect day for bringing her the healing she needed. (vv. 15-16)

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 showed the power of God to make impact, and, in that, it fit the pattern of many of Jesus' miracles.

But...this miracle was performed in a non-descript location (likely?) in an out-of-the-way place. **[Luke 13:10]...one of the synagogues)**

Plus, it was for the benefit of one non-descript woman who (likely?) wasn't a prominent member of society.

It would have been a wonderful miracle for the woman and for those who loved her.

But if you were one of those who wanted Jesus to make a Messianic splash, you 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 of village life or in the region, much less in all of Israel.

It wouldn't increase Jesus' popularity nation-wide. This miracle wouldn't be the tipping point that would take King Jesus to the throne.

And so many of Jesus' miracles were just like this one.

He would heal a leper or a blind person. He would cast out a demon from one demoniac. And then He would often tell the person who was healed, *"Don't say a word about this to anyone!"*

You might have had the thought, after watching this woman stand up straight for the first time in eighteen years, *"This is great - but it's no way to build a kingdom."*

Hold that thought, because right after recording this healing, Luke recorded Jesus' two short "kingdom" parables.

My Bible starts off the next verse with *"So..."*³

That *"So..."* tells us that 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.

To us - if we have ears to hear - they highlight just how different God's kingdom is from other kingdoms.

A Parable of Stunning Growth from Small to Huge (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

On the one hand, the parable is a story, and the elements of the story are simple.

There is a gardener. That gardener threw mustard plant seeds into his garden plot.

Normally, mustard was planted in open fields because the mustard plant was so invasive. But Jesus had this gardener planting mustard in his family garden.

The gardener's only role in the story is to set things in motion by sowing seed.

The mustard seed and plant

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

When we read this parable in Matthew and Mark, Jesus refers to the mustard seed being very, very small.⁴

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, yes, the mustard plant's seed is very small, and everybody knew it. But the mustard plant grows big.

In many places, the mustard plant grows to be a four foot tall bush. 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.

And then there are the birds.

The birds

Birds aren't normally appreciated in gardens. (They eat veggies in my garden.)

³ The Greek has the word *"oun"* (οὖν) - usually translated "therefore," signifying that what follows logically comes after what has preceded.

⁴ 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.

Here, though, they are welcomed to perch on the branches of the mustard tree.⁵

And that's the story. But it's more than a story. Jesus' story about the mustard seed's growth from tiny to tall was a sermon about the expansion of God's kingdom.

The Parable as Sermon

The kingdom of God ends BIG!

The end of the story about the mustard seed 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.

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 starts.

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.

Jesus' point is that God's kingdom work may begin small, puny, seemingly insignificant. But it grows to be surprisingly large.

Who would have ever thought, looking at the mustard seed, that it would grow to be a plant of such size and substance?⁶

And THAT is the way of the expansion of God's kingdom. 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 who ever lived?

He grew up in the backwards, backwoods province of Galilee and didn't appear in public until age thirty.

He taught for roughly three years, mostly in the rural villages of an oppressed people.

Only on rare occasions did He go to the big city of Jerusalem. 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.

Jesus performed miracles, but again, mostly in out-of-the-way villages. He drew a few large crowds but mostly shunned the spotlight.

He made a few converts. Most of them were uneducated and poor. Very few of them were 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.

⁵ We need not think of something negative when we read of the birds resting in the branches of the mustard tree, as some do. Ezekiel 17:22-24 pictures a cedar tree sprouting from a sprig that allows birds to rest. Psalm 104:12 refers positively to

birds finding shelter in trees. Jesus speaks positively of birds in the Sermon on the Mount by mentioning God's care of them.

⁶ 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.

And today, hundreds of millions of people around the world have entrusted their eternal souls to the care of Jesus.

They 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 thought that they were seeing the start of something big.

But that's exactly what was happening.

This "*who would have ever thought*" dynamic is 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, that after denying Jesus three times on the night before He died, less than two months later Simon Peter would be the leading articulate, courageous 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 substantial.

This "*who would have ever thought...*" principle applies to you.

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 draw attention to His life-changing ways?

Any action you take for Jesus may seem trivial at the time.

You gave someone a couple of minutes of listening; you provided a small bit of help. That's OK. Don't worry about the size of the gesture.

God is able to use that mustard-seed sized act to advance His kingdom in ways that are disproportionate to the size of the act.

You may have had an entirely inauspicious start. Not a problem. By God's grace, you can have a great and glorious God-honoring end.

That is Jesus' kingdom way.

And then, right after that story, Luke recorded a second parable with a similar, but slightly different, point.

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

This woman fulfilled the same function as the gardener did in the first parable. She's not the point of the story.

She appears simply to get the story started. She applied the leaven.

The flour

Then, there is the large lump of flour in which this woman "hid" the leaven.

Once it was turned into bread, three *sata* (roughly fifty pounds of flour) would have been enough to feed well over a hundred people.⁷

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

In our day, a cook can use any of several leavening agents. They are either biological, chemical, or even mechanical.

Best known to most of us is baker's yeast, which we add to a lump of dough to start 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 watches the leaven at work. It works invisibly, inside the lump.

In Jesus' day, 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!

The leaven had permeated, penetrated, infiltrated 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. Leaven often pictures how sin wiggles its way into our lives and poisons everything it touches.⁸

That is not the point here.

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

The Parable as Sermon

The kingdom of God's progress is often unobtrusive

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

⁷ A "sata" is a dry measure equaling about eight quarts; thus, she was dealing with twenty-four quarts of doughy material.

⁸ Most references to leaven in the Bible are negative, as in requiring unleavened bread in most sacrifices and especially in the Passover meal. Plus, Paul referred to

sin in the church as "*a little leaven.*" (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9) But there are Old Testament references to sacrifices that were to be offered to God from leavened bread. (See Leviticus 7:13)

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

I'm grateful to the big-name evangelists and the well-known leaders of very large churches in our world today.

Through the centuries, God has often used some people who have large influence and presence to accomplish His purposes.

Maybe you have attended conferences and seminars - as I have - 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.

It's quiet. In the shadows. Off-stage. Behind the curtains.

- God's Spirit breaks though when a few friends get real with each other, seek Him together, confess sins to each other.
- It often happens that in a one-on-one setting the talk switches from sports or the weather to the soul - and there are spiritual breakthroughs.
- God touches you 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. He died on a dark Friday afternoon.

This seems to me to be God's "tell." He's showing His hand.

This is the way He seems to prefer to push His kingdom forward, mostly 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.

God takes our conversations and leavens them with life-changing power beyond the actual words that we say.

He leavens acts of love with the beauty of grace.

He leavens gifts of mercy so that, at the end of the day, He receives the glory, and someone is drawn to Jesus.

The kingdom of God advances silently. But while it progresses unobtrusively, its impact, its progress is undeniable.

The kingdom of God's impact is always 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.

That is to say that a little bit of leaven goes a long way. The woman in the parable wouldn't have used much leaven, even on that huge lump of dough.

Just a little bit of leaven is enough. Without fail, the leaven does its work. 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 service for Jesus will make an impact.

You may or may not see its impact now. You may only learn of its impact in eternity. But your gift won't just sit there.

God will leaven your service and love and prayer to create impact disproportionate to your service and love and prayer.

He will work in ways you would never have dreamed to change you, to change your friend, to provoke a response, maybe to bring about softening.

That's what leaven does.

Conclusion:

In the whole history of the world, what project ever started with more promise than the Tower of Babel? (Genesis 11)

All of humanity gathered on the plains of Shinar to build a tower that would reach up to heaven. It was the best that mankind could do.

God wasn't impressed.

He brought the whole project to a screeching stop by confusing languages - and proceeded to continue His own kingdom work among smaller groups of families and tribes.

Towers of Babel still persist. And we still applaud the flashy kick-off, the grand opening, and the successful launch. And I'm not saying that God doesn't sometimes work BIG!

But the mustard seed and the leaven tell us that His way, typically, is the small way.

So, friends, think small.

Remember that God's way is to advance His kingdom rule and reign by bringing about impact from your life disproportionate to your size, ability, station in life, age, health, or status.