



More Than a Mustard Seed Faith

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 13:31-32

June 20, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Melanie Hardison

Welcome again to this series on parables in the Gospel of Matthew. The last two weeks, Tom preached about the parable of the sower, who scatters seeds all over the place, with the idea that we are to trust the gospel. And he talked about the importance of the soil in which seeds land and that the kind of soil we are really matters.

In today's parable, Jesus uses the example of one kind of seed, the mustard seed, and lest you think we are going to talk about seeds this entire series, I promise that after today, we are done with seeds. But they really are such a great metaphor—especially for the life of faith. And all of us can identify seeds that were planted in our own lives that others trusted would grow and that God found fit to grow in us.

But before we get into what the parable of the mustard seed is, I want to say what it is not. Most of us, when we hear a mustard seed scripture, think about the old adage that all you need is a “mustard seed faith.” How many of you have heard that or said it yourselves? I know I have. That faith—even the size of a mustard seed—can move mountains.

Well, that image comes not from this parable, but later in Matthew, when Jesus casts a demon out of a child, and the disciples come to him and say, “We tried. Why couldn't we do that?” and Jesus says, “Because of your little faith. If you just have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains.”

That's where we get the idea of faith the size of a mustard seed. And I think we can't help but bring that image with us when we hear other scripture talking about mustard seeds, as in today's parable. If the two stories about mustard seeds were connected in Jesus' mind, it's not clear to us. Let's assume for now that they're not connected.

Because what the parable of the mustard seed is connected to is a string of parables in Matthew 13 that all begin, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”: the sower and the seed with the soil, or yeast, or a pearl, or a hidden treasure, or good fish among the bad fish. These are all images that Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of heaven.

That's where today's mustard seed scripture finds its home, nestled among this string of parables where Jesus uses something tiny or hidden that has the potential to grow into, or do, something great—to describe God's realm. So this one tiny seed—the smallest of seeds—grows into “the greatest of shrubs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

It is a powerful image that this tiny seed can grow into a great, big tree. So powerful that Jesus could have ended the parable right there: Faith is a tiny seed that God can use to grow into a big, strong faith. That is powerful, and for some of us, that is a fervent prayer, as it should be. But the parable doesn't end there.

Some of you know that during the pandemic, I adopted a kitten, named Whiskey (that's a story for another day). Whiskey was 2 months old when I got him, a little fuzzy thing, and he had a lot of energy. And now he's 10 months old, and not so fuzzy anymore. So you'd think he'd be settling down, but he's still got a lot of energy. He loves to run and play and ambush Ollie (my other cat) and ambush me, and he's got a lot of energy. Did I mention all the energy?

Well, now that I'm back in my office at the church, Whiskey needs something to keep him occupied. There's a large window on the front of my house that looks over the yard. And it struck me one day, as I watched him stalk a bird outside the window, that what he needed was a bird feeder to bring birds to

the yard so he could watch them all day long.

Sure enough, I got a bird feeder, and the cat has been mesmerized. Which is all to say, I'm now learning about birds. And what do birds need? Birds need food, a source of water, and places where they can take baths but most importantly, birds need shelter. All of God's creatures need shelter.

Birds need a place where they can assemble all the twigs and sticks and little bits of things they collect to build their nests. They need a sturdy place, like the crook of a branch, to provide enough shelter for the building of a nest—a place where they can lay their eggs, a place where they can raise their young.

Now, some of you are birders. I'm not a birder. (Clearly, I got a bird feeder more so to occupy my kitten than for the birds!) But I sure enjoy watching the birds these days. They're so calming to watch—with their beautiful colors—and I love listening to their happy chirps and lovely melodies. And Jesus thought they were important enough to help teach about the kingdom of heaven.

So listen to this text again with the birds in mind: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

If we focus on the growth of the seed into the tree, and equate that with the other scripture we talked about—that a tiny faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains—if we do that, and we stop there, I think we miss Jesus' point.

The tree's growth is not for growth's sake; it's not even for the tree's sake. The tree's growth is for the birds of the air. And all the other wildlife that takes refuge in the safety of its branches, in the relief of its shade, in the coolness of its leaves. The seed grows from the tiniest of things into the greatest of things, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. For the sake of those who need refuge, safety, shelter, and rest.

David Rozelle is an Army Captain, and tomorrow, June 21, is the anniversary of the day that changed his life forever. Eighteen years ago David was stationed in Iraq. He was doing normal everyday duties, driving from one place to another, when his

Humvee encountered a landmine. In the explosion, David lost his foot and part of his leg. He was flown to Walter Reed in Maryland and endured multiple surgeries before he was sent home.

Recuperating at home in Colorado with his wife and their new baby, David received a number of medals, including a Purple Heart. But he was overtaken by depression. He felt worthless spending day after day on the couch.

One day, David found himself at home alone and finally let himself have a big, cathartic cry and started coming to terms with all the ways his life was changing. He got a prosthetic leg and found the strength to begin exercising again. He decided he wanted to stay in the Army and work again. He also knew that soldiers needed more than what he was getting.

He says, "I left Walter Reed unarmed with what I needed to heal. There was no established support system to take care of me." Doctors provided physical care, but David needed his emotional and spiritual wounds tended, too.

He went back to Walter Reed to support other amputees, but what he discovered is that he needed more skills in order to truly listen and come alongside them. One day, his church held an informational session on Stephen Ministry. David decided to attend and he felt God calling him to grow his faith as a Christian by serving others. He became trained in the arts of listening and prayer, and while going through Stephen Ministry training, he received the news that the Army considered him fit for service again.

He wondered where and how he might serve. When the company he had served with in Iraq returned home, David went to welcome them and realized: He had to go back to Iraq.

And so, a year later, almost to the day of that explosion in the Humvee, David returned to Iraq. He became the first soldier in history to become an amputee and then return to the same battlefield. This time, he had an expanded mission: To support to his fellow soldiers in the ways he wished he'd been supported.

David Rozelle knew what it was like to be a bird of the air with no place to build a nest. So he learned

how to listen and support and nurture, and in his learning, in his journey of healing, in his transformation, he himself became those safe, welcoming tree branches. Now others can come and find shelter and safety in his listening ear.

Village Church knows the importance of this, too. It's why we have Stephen Ministry and a Food Pantry and Mission Sewing. It's why we host anti-racism book studies and sponsor mission trips. It's why we're reaching out to congregations across the city to partner with us in placing counselors all over town and remove the barriers to high-quality mental healthcare. Sometimes, when we're the ones hurting and in need of a safe place to land, a mustard seed faith is about all we can muster.

We're not all going to be a David Rozelle. We each have our own challenges, and we each have our own opportunities—our own good to do. But it's not for us; it's for the world.

So, be the seed, be that good soil, be the tree, be the healing branches. Because it's all of us, working together, doing the good that's ours to do, that adds up to more than a mustard seed faith. So that all of us—you and me and David Rozelle, and everyone who needs a break, or needs mental healthcare, or a world free of oppression and discrimination, or a safe place to build that nest—might be able to do so, as we work and live toward the flourishing of the kingdom of heaven, toward God's promised day. Amen.