

## The Mustard Seed Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

Did you ever ponder how many times and ways Jesus uses seeds to teach us about the Kingdom of God? Jesus, as a boy, must have wandered on the hills and fields of Galilee and seen farmers and reapers at their work. He must have marveled at seeds—tiny, dry, dead things—being put in the soil and bringing forth green fields that fed villages.

Jesus, growing up, also learned about how God worked in the world. He was uniquely aware of God's yearning and God's plans. And there was a lot of apt comparisons. Seedtime and harvest happened in the Kingdom of God as well as in Galilee. So, as we ponder all of these seed and harvest parables of the Kingdom, I believe we are really exploring the mind of Jesus.

One of the simplest properties of seeds is that they grow. They grow impressively—especially in the case of tiny seeds that develop into big plants, which Jesus talks about today. I think a straightforward interpretation of the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven would go: the realm where God is honored and where God's dreams are coming true, (i.e. the Kingdom) is always expanding. You may not see it. It may not be knocking your socks off. But it is always growing. One day it will be wonderful and immense.

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on July 27, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

Now, because this is the case, you and I can begin to live accordingly. We can relax and be confident about God's work in the world.

Have you ever looked around and thought Christianity is going down the tubes? Sociologists project that Muslims will outnumber Christians in 2025. The Presbyterian Church lays off half the staff at headquarters in Louisville. Richard Dawkins' atheist manifesto: The God Delusion becomes a popular Christmas gift. Parks and Recreation schedules a soccer game on Sunday morning. All of a sudden we think the faith is dying.

It's not. Oh, there's a numerical ebb and flow. But what these parables whisper to you and me is that the Kingdom of God is inevitable and invincible.

Now, I'm not suggesting that there will always be more and more Christians. That's obviously not true. Early missionaries blazed a trail into China back in the year 635. In a hundred years there were 358 major Christian centers spread throughout every Chinese province. But by the year 987, an Arab historian wrote that there remained not a single Christian in all of China!

Clearly, Jesus isn't simply talking about more and more baptisms and more and more squeezing into pews. Something, however, continues to grow. Always there's ferment.

Clearly, what is meant is that growth is in intensity, growth in maturity, growth in faith, growth in moral purity.

Let me pop a few representative verses

II Cor. 10.15: growth in faith  
II Thess. 1.3: increase in love  
Col. 1.10: increase in knowledge of God  
2 Cor. 9.10: growth in the fruits of righteousness  
2 Pet. 3.18: growth in grace  
I Cor. 15.58 increase in the work of the Lord  
Col. 2w.7: deepening of thanksgiving

Suddenly, a big picture comes into focus, namely that the reign of God is indeed like a mustard seed. It's always expanding in some sense.

Let me speak very personally. I have long tried to keep track of how the Christian movement is doing in our country. My four years with you happen to have coincided with a very significant decline in all church groups and traditions. The Southern Baptist Convention lost members for the first time last year. Even the big contemporary worship mega-churches are reporting disinterest among young adults.

Sounds like something to worry about. But what if Jesus were correct about the Kingdom being like a mustard seed? Couldn't we expect to see other signs of growth? I believe we do. I just read The Shack, a marvelously insightful and moving novel on how God changes people. Isn't it interesting that just when the Christian movement seems so troubled, such a powerful

book comes along? I'm excited about a fresh outbreak of interest among contemporary young theologians in the topic of this sermon, namely the Kingdom of God. I think I've done more theological reading and learning about my faith in the last 12 months than during any other time in my adult life.

You see, the growth doesn't quit. The Kingdom expands. We can stop wasting Kleenex on God's work in this world!

What we can also do is to start looking for that growth, that ferment. Have you ever prayed, "Where are you working right now, Lord? Where's your reign and realm moving forward?" Pray that prayer. Then expect God to show you what he's doing. I've got to tell you I believe there is a lot of spirit in some of the local mission projects that Christians are involved in here in LaGrange. Our Berta Weathersbee School work just may be an answer to that prayer. So many of you have felt called to that work. Other churches are doing similar work in schools. Maybe that's where the Kingdom is breaking freshly into our immediate world!

You need to pray that prayer. We're learning God's realm is always expanding. If we could discern where it is expanding, you and I could go and be a part! Now that's what it means to help to usher in the Kingdom. When we say in the Lord's prayer,

"thy Kingdom come," we can put legs on that prayer by getting involved.

One final thought. Plant Mustard seeds. The Kingdom we learn today starts small. The Mustard Seed is among the smallest. Easy to miss. Bury it and you'd never find it. Until God makes it grow. The smallest act of faithfulness, or kindness, or fidelity to God is never lost, never forgotten.

As I was writing this part of the sermon my thoughts went back to my seminary days working on a trash truck. It was a cold morning and the truck needed to go somewhere. My co-worker hopped into the cab and I climbed onto the open back bed. We hit 35 mph and suddenly I realized that my body was really chilled. I felt trapped and very cold and very uncomfortable. As I was kicking myself for forgetting a jacket, my co-worker's hand popped out of the side window holding his sweatshirt. He had been thinking about what it must have been like on top of that truck and he offered me his coat. This is a very simple, small kindness. A Mustard Seed. But I'm talking about it 32 years later. The Kingdom of God is like that.

Every tiny act of hidden faithfulness plants a mustard seed. You say, "you're forgiven," the world changes. You assist someone on the bottom of society with his luggage, and a mustard seed is planted and will develop someday into something

you couldn't even imagine. You give something that really has value to someone who never would possess such a thing, and a ferment starts that will change everything.

Because the Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man sowed in a field.

Next time you attempt to sing the "Lord's Prayer" remember the mustard seed. Remember how the tune stretches us at the end. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and (if you have any voice left) and the glory forever." That's the sermon: God's reign may be a mustard seed today. Leaven today. But one day it will be the kingdom and power and glory forever. God's doing it so we can relax. The growth is more than just numbers. It's growth in depth and love and knowledge. Expect it. Look for it. And get involved with it. Because every act of faithfulness and grace, no matter how insignificant or hidden anticipates—and ushers in—that great day.