

Cultivating Faith Sermon Series
Mustard Seed Faith - Matthew 13:31-35
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Have you ever felt small? A few years ago I travelled to Alaska and got to spend some time at the basecamp of Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. At 6-foot-3 and several pounds, I'm not used to feeling tiny, but that's exactly how I felt as I stared up at these majestic creations that circled me. Size is often about perspective, and in those moments, I felt incredibly small in the most humbling, reverent way.

But feeling small does not always come from such divine inspirations. I led a group of 22 youth and adults to New Orleans to help gut a house damaged by Hurricane Katrina. We were so excited to be going, believing we could really get some quality work done and leave our mark on that ravaged area. And then we got there and looked around and the magnitude of the devastation. Mile after mile after mile of destruction. And we thought 22 people were going to make a difference? What could we do that would even begin make a dent? We were overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness in the face of the need we saw. We felt so small.

If you've ever felt that smallness, these parables are for you. Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds. That may not mean much to us today. Not many of us are growing mustard seed plants in our gardens. That's because the mustard plant is what one source called "a malignant weed with dangerous takeover properties." That sounds more like an evil corporation than a plant, and it's certainly not the kind of flora we would want to put as a centerpiece on our dining room table. And yet, Jesus said, that is what the kingdom of Heaven is like.

And then, as if Jesus hasn't scandalized his listeners enough, he says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. Do you know what yeast is? It's a type of fungus with a very specific function. I used to have a breadmaker, and for the three weeks I used it, it was great! I remember putting the ingredients together, and the last thing to go in was the yeast. I had to be very careful that it didn't touch the water. I would make a tiny hole in the dry ingredients with my finger and then add just a little yeast. When mixed with the other ingredients, the yeast actually eats the sugars in the other ingredients and expels carbon dioxide. These gas bubbles are what cause the dough to rise and create the pockets of air in the bread that give it a light texture.

So let's pause to recap. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a malignant weed with dangerous takeover properties and like a gas-expelling fungus that you eat in your sandwich. With a savior like this, who needs enemies! But the point here isn't that Jesus is trying to put us down. Just the opposite! He's trying to help us see that if we want to accomplish great things in God's name, we can't do it lying around. Like a growing plant, like a baking loaf, like a crucified savior, we have to rise up!

You wouldn't think a tiny seed would produce a plant in which birds could build nests. You wouldn't think a pinch of yeast could help create a two-pound loaf of bread. You wouldn't think a group of teenagers and a few brave (or insane) adults could make a dent in the incredible need they saw. And you wouldn't think a popular, rabble-rousing rabbi crucified like a common criminal would be remembered a week after his death, much less 2000 years later.

But as Jesus points out in these parables, here's the problem with that kind of thinking. We tend to think of faith quantitatively, as if our soul is a measuring cup with marks on the outside to let us know where we stand spiritually. "Your soul is only $\frac{1}{4}$ full – better get to

church!” I wonder how many times people have said to themselves during trying times, “If I only had more faith.” Even the disciples turn to Jesus and plead, “Increase our faith!” But when it comes to faith, how do we determine what’s enough? When everything goes our way? When our prayers are answered the way we think they should be? What’s too little or too much faith? Evaluating our faith that way puts a lot of pressure on us to measure up, and we will always fall short.

That feeling of falling short can be devastating to us. It’s a terrible disposition to feel like you’re not good enough. That’s true in your relationships, in your job, and in your faith. Faith is a journey, but too often we treat it like a destination. If I just do this more, if I just pray more, if I just give more, then I’ll be good enough. But what these parables tell us is that God can work with even the smallest amount of faith to make us more than good enough.

I don’t usually like to quote famous theologians because I don’t want you to think I’m trying to impress you, but it’s fitting today for me to quote Lloyd Christmas, the character played by Jim Carrey in the movie, “Dumb and Dumber.” Stick with me here. Lloyd has a crush on Mary, so he works up his courage and says, “I want to ask you a question, straight out, flat out, and I want you to give me the honest answer. What do you think the chances are of a guy like you and a girl like me ending up together?” With much trepidation, she replies, “Well Lloyd, that’s difficult to say. We really don’t…” He interrupts and says, “Hit me with it! Just give it to me straight! I came a long way just to see you Mary, just… The least you can do is level with me. What are my chances?” She says, “Not good.” Lloyd gulps and says, “You mean, not good like one out of a hundred?” She says, “I’d say more like one out of a million.” There’s a long pause while Lloyd processes this information, then he smiles and says, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance!”

With God, there is always a chance. Even if our faith is only as big as a mustard seed, there’s a chance. What Jesus tells us in these parables is that faith is not measured quantitatively, but qualitatively. What matters in our faith is not the amount but the attitude. We think if you have a little money you buy a little and if you have a lot of money you can buy a lot. But faith is not like that. Faith is a relationship. Faith is trust in God. Even if we are 99% unsure of God’s presence, 99% full of doubts, 99% convinced that God doesn’t care about us, we still have that one percent, and that’s all God needs. God can work with that to make amazing things happen. We see it over and over again in scripture: Jesus works with two loaves and five fish to feed a crowd. Jesus journeys with 12 followers who swing between moments of faith-based bravado and faithless cowardice. Jesus provides healing for people who say, “I believe, help my unbelief!” None of their measuring cups of faith were full, and neither are ours. But Jesus tells us in these parables it’s not the amount of faith that matters, it’s whether or not we trust God can work with what we have.

Without that trust, we would be pretty hopeless. We’d have no chance of measuring up. As we seek to live out our faith, none of us are doing what we are doing because we feel particularly equipped or qualified or ready. We don’t do what we do because we think we’re accomplishing world-changing things. We are kind to our neighbors or participate in Sunday school or give to the church or sometimes remember to pray and read the Bible. I mean, we try our best, right? But do we ever measure up? In the grand scheme, these are such little things. Do they really matter? Can one mustard seed make a difference?

I remember on a mission trip to Kansas City, our first day was spent walking along a street picking up garbage. And I remember hearing a bit of grumbling in our group that evening. We thought we were going to be building houses and making a difference, and we were

relegated to picking up trash along the street. But you know what? That trash had to be picked up by someone. It might as well have been us. Someone's got to hold the ladder so someone else can climb it. Someone's got to fetch more nails so they can be hammered. It's easy for us to assume that somebody else will do it. Somebody has to do the small things, because with enough people doing enough small things, the mustard-seed things, big things get accomplished.

That's what these parables promise us. If we give what we have to offer, no matter how small, God can do the rest. We can slay our Goliaths, we can still our storms, we can be God's hands and feet, not because of who we are, but because of what God can do through us when we are willing to give God our mustard seed faith, to trust that even though we don't feel worthy to build a house or teach a class or say a prayer, God cares less about the quantity of our faith than the quality of it.

A prayer I heard recently speaks directly to Jesus' message in this text. It goes something like: "Dear God, I don't pray for enough faith to move mountains. I can get dynamite and bulldozers to do that. What I need and ask for is enough faith to move me." There is work to be done. There are children to be fed. There are people to be welcomed. There are wounds to be touched and healed. There are hearts to be softened. Like the mustard plant, like the yeast-inspired bread, like the crucified Christ, may God give us the strength, the courage and the will to show up, trusting that, through God's grace and goodness, we are more than good enough.