

The Kin-Dom of God sermon series
Mustard Seed Faith – Mark 4:30-32
July 9, 2023
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I spent this past week in Wyoming with my Uncle Mark and my cousins, Scott and Chris. We planned this trip over a year ago, not long after my Uncle Jack, Mark's brother and Scott and Chris' father, passed away. It's amazing how the death of a loved one can make you re-prioritize the importance of spending time with people you love. It was a great trip filled with a ton of new memories, like a crazy July 4th fireworks show in Centennial and several moose sightings, including one that almost ran into our car. My relatives also tried to help me write this sermon, but most of what they said shouldn't be repeated from the pulpit. Sorry guys!

Our hiking goal was Medicine Bow Peak, a 12,000-foot slice of rock jutting up from the Wyoming plain, part of what's called the Snowy Range. In reading about the hike, reviews said it was hard but doable, and one guy said he and his hiking partner made it to the top with relative ease. His hiking partner was his four-year-old son. I thought, "Ha! How hard could this be?"

Well, it could be really hard. And it was. The total hike took about eight hours, the elevation gain was around 1600 feet, and the four of us stopped about a million times along the way to catch our breath. The wind on the climb was brutal, the temperature plummeted as we reached the top, and just to add a little fun, it rained several times. I think God was saying, "Did you really ask me how hard could this be?"

We eventually made it to the summit, and the view was beyond description. Just ask me, I have about a thousand pictures I can show you. As I sat at the top, looking out over the amazing beauty of God's creation, literally breathless, I felt...small. Really small, to the point of insignificance. Sometimes we have to get a view from up high to realize our place in this world.

If we stop and think about it, we are inconsequential. We are a blip on the radar screen of history. We are a drop in the ocean of humanity. In the grand scheme of things, we don't really matter to the universe. But we matter to God, and that's what Jesus is telling us in this parable today. In this sermon series, we're seeking to understand the kin-dom of God, a modern updating of the concept of the kingdom of God which removes the troublesome hierarchical term "kingdom" and replaces it with "kin-dom," which emphasizes our connection to each other.

Jesus tells us the kin-dom 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. When we find a parable difficult to relate to, it's fun to reimagine it in a modern context. I have an idea for this one. I want to compare us to a bunch of clowns. This will resonate with some of you more than others. Did you ever go to the circus when you were a kid? I went to a few, and one of the things I loved was the clowns. My favorite part was when they would drive this tiny car into the center of the ring, and then a clown would get out. And then another. And another. And another. Maybe Jesus would say today that the kin-dom of God is like a clown car, which appears tiny but provides enough clowns to entertain a whole arena.

Here's the challenge, though. In our world today, we tend to equate small with bad and big with good. If you disagree, how many of you drove tiny clown cars to church today? That's what I thought. We have been trained to believe a few of something is OK, but a lot of something is even better. If you don't believe me, go to Costco on a Saturday afternoon. Our consumerist culture tells us that we should have what we want, and what we want is bigger and better and more than what others have. Last week, I preached about how the Israelites were

building the Tower of Babel to the heavens because they wanted to make a name for themselves. Bigger is better.

This mindset has the dangerous potential to infiltrate our faith. We can fall into the trap of thinking 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 ¼ full – better get to church!” I wonder how many times people have said to themselves during a crisis, “If I only had more faith.” Even the disciples turn to Jesus and plead, “Increase our faith!” as if Jesus could sprinkle a little faith-growing dust on them. 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. We believe we should have Costco-sized faith, and we always fall short.

That feeling 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 this parable tells us is that God can work with even the smallest amount of faith to make us more than good enough, to make us valuable contributors to the kin-dom of God. We don’t have to have big faith; we simply have to trust in our big God.

Even if our faith is only as big as a mustard seed, that’s enough for God. What Jesus tells us in this parable 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 calls 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 it’s not the amount of faith that matters, it’s whether or not we trust God can work with what we have to build God’s kin-dom here on earth. Can one mustard seed make a difference?

On our recent mission trip to Costa Rica, we were helping build a kitchen onto a house for Sol and her family. The house was tiny and dilapidated, but the mission organization we were working with was slow helping to rebuild it into a more livable space. So, the eight of us spent part of the week hauling concrete and rock down to Sol’s house to lay the foundation for the kitchen.

At some point during the week, the book “To Kill a Mockingbird” was mentioned. Charlie, the head of the missions organization, said he loved that book. One of our group mentioned that some people find the book problematic because it promotes a “white savior” narrative, in which people of color can only be saved by white people. I made the comparison between that narrative and what we eight white people were doing in Costa Rica. Charlie paused and said, “These people don’t know anything about a white savior complex. All they see is that eight people came here from the United States to help them build a kitchen on their house, and they are nothing but grateful.” In the end, we didn’t finish the kitchen. But we started it, and trusted that God would send the people to continue the work.

We can come up with all kinds of reasons not to help build the kin-dom of God. If you step back and look at it, it can make you feel so small. The need is overwhelming. The problems

seem insurmountable. Any contribution you make will be just a blip on the radar screen, a drop in the ocean. 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. We don't have to be big, because God is.

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 foundations to be laid. There is trash to be picked up. There is justice to be advocated for. There are hearts to be softened. If we want God's kingdom to be real here on earth, if we want the good news of Jesus Christ to truly make a difference, then someone has to do those mustard-seed things. Doesn't have to be done perfectly. But it has to be done.

Do you know we have something here at Crestwood called the Seed Fund? It was established by a congregation member several years ago to fund new ministry initiatives. If someone had an idea that wasn't in the budget, we could use the Seed Fund to get it started. That fund was used to kindle our relationship with Glendover Elementary School and to restart our men's ministry. The Seed Fund currently has \$5500 in it, just waiting to be used to do God's work in this world. All we need is an idea, no matter how small.

Jesus' death on the cross planted a seed within us, a seed of love and grace and welcome and good news. That seed can lie dormant within us, or we can do the work of feeding it and watering it and cultivating it. Seeds sown are meant to grow up. My prayer is that this congregation is good stewards of the seeds planted here and that people who come in contact with us feel at home, no matter how small they feel in this world. A mustard seed grows into a bush where birds find a place to build a nest and make a home. I wonder what God can do with us if we're willing to trust in God to work with our mustard-seed faith? I guess there's only one way to find out..