

Title: *From Small Beginnings*

Text: Matthew 13:31-35

Trade-up days has become a staple of our youth ministry here at Salem Avenue. Both summers that Jason has been here, our youth have asked you to think of some household item that you might be willing to donate. The basic idea is that they come to your door and ask you if you have something which is a “little bit better” than what they’re giving you. First year, I think we traded a pewter picture frame from Mexico for a rubber mallet. It’s been a success both years as the items collected are then brought back here and put in a silent auction to raise money for camp.

I read about a man who tried a sort of trade-up plan on his own.

Kyle MacDonald was stuck in a dead-end job and strapped for money, so he came up with an improbable plan: starting with one red paperclip, he would trade on the Internet until he exchanged it for a house.

First, he traded the red paperclip for a fish-shaped pen. Next, he traded the pen for a doorknob. He traded the doorknob for a Coleman stove. He traded the Coleman stove for an electric generator. He traded the electric generator for a Budweiser sign and a keg of beer, which he then traded for a snowmobile. Exactly one year and 14 trades later, MacDonald finally reached his goal: he exchanged a part in a Hollywood movie for a home in Saskatchewan, Canada.

The true story of Kyle MacDonald is told in his book *One Red Paperclip*. Now the book is being made into a movie. Fame, fortune, a book, a movie deal, and a home—it all began with one red paperclip.

Sounds incredible, doesn’t it? But I believe our Christian faith is like that red paperclip. Jesus said that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we will be able to move mountains. A mustard seed is very small—far smaller than a paperclip. And yet, Jesus says if we have that much faith, “Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Maybe next time we do trade-up days, we can keep going til we get some beachfront property in Maui.

We are more familiar with the mustard seed when it comes to talking about our faith. The idea is that a mustard seed is very small so it doesn’t matter how much faith we have as long as our faith is in the right object. It’s not the size or content of our faith as much as it is the object of our faith.

We may not be as familiar with the parable that Jesus tells us here. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The two mentions that I’ve made here are the only places that the word mustard appears in the New Testament. It was proverbial wisdom in the world of the Bible that the mustard seed was about the smallest seed that anyone could imagine.

Jesus has told us about the different types of soils and invites us to get the rocks and

weeds out of our life so that the seed of the word can take root. When it does, it produces a super-abundant harvest.

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.” The ancient writer Pliny wrote about mustard,

With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand, when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.

There are two points of tension in this parable – one is the smallness of the beginning of the kingdom and the second is the nature of just what a mustard plant is and how something like that could grow into this big, stately tree.

Jesus said that the mustard plant becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. First of all, a mustard plant could be regarded by some folks as something that is just kind of like a weed. Once you plant it, you can’t ever get rid of it. It’s kind of like a kudzu vine.

We were driving through the deep south last summer on our way to Florida and Allyson and Jonathan had never seen a kudzu vine before. You see kudzu all over the south. It was introduced to this country in 1876 in the Centennial exposition as something exotic from Asia and as something which could be used for forage here. It was used in Georgia back in the 30s for erosion control and the problem is that it just took over. It can cover everything in sight if there’s no effort to control it. In the summertime, it can grow almost a foot a day.

There is, in other words, a distinction between the wild mustard and its domesticated counterpart, but even when one deliberately cultivates the latter for its medicinal or culinary properties, there is an ever-present danger that it will destroy the garden. And, apart from those domesticated types, such as *brassica nigra* or *sinapis alba*, there is, as Douglas Oakman emphasizes, the wild mustard, charlock, or *sinapis arvensis*, whose “plants have from time immemorial been found as weeds in grain fields”. The mustard plant, therefore, is, as domesticated in the garden, dangerous and, as wild in the grain fields, deadly. The point is not just that it starts small and ends big but that its bigness is not exactly something you want.

So, is Jesus trying to say that there is something destructive about the kingdom? Isn’t the kingdom uniformly and always positive? Maybe there’s just a little bit of tongue in cheek here, not in the point of the kingdom starting out small and growing to great size and influence, but in the choice of illustrations Jesus uses.

The kingdom is starting out small. We believe that God took on human flesh and became one of us in Jesus Christ. He came to an obscure village in a backwards region of the empire and started out very small without great fanfare. There was a winsomeness about him that made people be drawn to him but there was also a humility about him that told people they’d better know what they were getting into if they were going to go after him.

His disciples weren't comprised of people from anybody's A-list. A couple of fisherman, a tax-collector, a few other hungry souls that found that there was just something compelling about Jesus that made them follow him. Even at this time when Jesus delivers this teaching, there wasn't really any way to know that this movement would become what it is today. Some folks heard him. Others were intrigued. A lot of people just walked away and ignored him. Some people, his own family included thought he was just plain crazy.

As one scholar puts it: The presence of the hoped-for kingdom in Jesus, his works and disciples, is no more obvious than a garden herb -- but the kingdom will come in God's power and glory nevertheless. A king who operates in meekness and rides a donkey instead of a war horse can be represented by a kingdom symbolized by a garden herb rather than a great tree.

It is kind of fun to play with the imagery of the kingdom being like a kudzu vine. You can't control it. You can't get rid of it. And if it's not careful, it just takes over everything.

That raises an interesting question. Why would you want to get rid of it? As believers we don't -- or we say we don't. How often, though do we resist God's kingship in our lives? Those who are hostile to the kingdom try to stomp it out. The Romans thought that it was just a small little movement in Judaism. It wouldn't be any problem to snuff it out, but the more they tried snuffing it out, they found that the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

When missionaries were forced to leave China in 1949 following the communist revolution, it didn't seem that they really had made much of an impact. Some seeds had been planted and we said, "All we can do is stand back and pray." Now 60 years later, one of the most encouraging and inspirational stories on the planet is of the growth of the church of Jesus Christ in China. We wonder if we should send in any western missionaries as we have opportunity because we don't want to mess up what's already happening there.

It's easy to equate the kingdom with the church. To say, as goes the kingdom, so goes the church. The kingdom is bigger though than even the church. Any time God puts an idea into someone's mind and something big or good grows from it, it's a God thing. When was the last time you looked at some incredible manifestation of the work of God and said, "That's just a God thing."

We're trying to establish a Celebrate Recovery ministry here in this church. I'm heartened by the people who have expressed an interest and who have expressed support. This would basically be a local chapter of a ministry that was started about 20 years ago in Saddleback Church. A man by the name of John Baker knew he needed to be set free from his alcoholism and at the urging of his wife, started attending Saddleback Church. He came to Christ and then started working on a proposal for a recovery ministry in that megachurch. What he gave to Rick Warren was about 15-20 pages of single-spaced type. They started out with a few and now that is a national and international movement with chapters in every state of the union and around the world in churches and prisons as not only alcoholics are finding wholeness and health and healing in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says that when this tree, which is really more of a shrub grows to its height. It provides a shelter and a refuge for the birds of the air. Doesn't that seem just a little strange to you? Someone said, "It rises above challenges, it withstands the wind and it is noble. If you've heard me teach on parables before, you've heard me say that there is something in the parable that doesn't fit or doesn't make sense.

Walter Wink says about parables, "Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives. Parables are not illustrations; they do not support, elaborate or simplify a more basic idea. They are not ideas at all, nor can they ever be reduced to theological statements. They are the jeweled portals of another world; we cannot see through them like windows, but through their surfaces are refracted lights that would otherwise blind us--or pass unseen."

Most of us probably have bird feeders in our yards. During the storm last week, I watched as a squirrel perched himself atop our bird feeder and chowed down on the seed that Allyson had put out. I didn't buy my house so that I could have a place to put a bird feeder. I had a bigger agenda than just the birds of the air. If you take that point literally, it just seems kind of trivial, nothing against birds.

Ezekiel 17 helps us put in some perspective. He says, "²² 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. ' I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.' "

Part of the vision that God gives Ezekiel is to say, "I'm going to plant a tree on the mountain heights of Israel and it will be so great and it will grow and birds of every kind will find shelter in the shade of its branches. In describing the past greatness of Assyria (or Nineveh), Ezekiel says, "⁶ All the birds of the air nested in its boughs, all the beasts of the field gave birth under its branches; all the great nations lived in its shade."

Now God has a bigger agenda than birds. Birds represent something else. Birds are a metaphor for all the Gentile nations coming and finding refuge in the kingdom of God. Jesus' disciples had a limited vision of what the kingdom was supposed to be and who it was supposed to benefit. They just kind of thought that they were God's people and that was it. So there's a kind of double scandal in Jesus imagery of the mustard seed and the mustard plant and the tree and the birds. A plant that is not the most beautiful, that is kind of persistent and some may even say obnoxious that grows to provide a place for birds is what the kingdom of God is like.

Jesus also would refer to sparrows. We view sparrows as worthless, dime a dozen, insignificant. Jesus said two sparrows are sold for a penny.

The kingdom of God is for whoever will come and find refuge in its branches.

Jesus uses another image for the kingdom that some may find troubling. He says, “It’s like leaven.” It’s like a woman who takes an unusually large measure of flour and mixes a little leaven in that large measure of flour. It doesn’t take very long at all before that little bit of leaven has worked through the entire lump.

Some people may find that troubling because leaven is a symbol of evil. The devout Jewish person was supposed to remove all of the leaven from their house so that they live a life of purity and be cleansed from every evil.

Pope John Paul II said, “Every Christian – as he explores the historical record of Scripture and tradition and comes to a deep, abiding faith – experiences that Christ is the risen one and that he is therefore the eternally living one. It is a deep, life-changing experience. No true Christian can keep it hidden as a personal matter. For such an encounter with the living God cries out to be shared – like the light that shines, like the yeast that leavens the whole mass of dough.

The kingdom becomes all encompassing, all-embracing, all-consuming. It grows through your life to embrace the last, the least and the lost.

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