

Sermon Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

A revival minister once decided he was going to give a visual demonstration to add emphasis to his special sermon so he had four separate jars. In the first jar, he had alcohol, and he put a worm in that alcohol, and set it aside. He had filled the second jar with dense cigarette smoke, and he put a worm in there, and sealed it up, and set it aside while he preached. The third jar was filled about halfway up with chocolate syrup. He put a worm in the chocolate syrup and set it aside while he preached. The fourth jar had just clean, good soil in there, and he put a worm in it and set it aside while he preached. At the conclusion of the sermon, the minister reported the following results. He picked up the jars one at a time, and the first worm in alcohol was dead. The second worm in the cigarette smoke filled jar was dead. The third worm in the chocolate syrup-filled jar was dead. The fourth worm in the good clean soil was alive. The minister asked this revival congregation, “What did you learn from this demonstration?” A little old lady in the back raised her hand, and she said, “It appears to me that as long as you drink and smoke and eat chocolate, you will not have worms!” Now, the trouble with parables is that they can have more than one meaning, more than one meaning. Let me try, in this sermon, to sell you on a meaning beyond the obvious. Let me try to sell you on a meaning beyond the obvious, but first, another story!

A man named Bill stopped into a little general store, and he was looking for a bottle of mustard. The shelves were loaded with salt bags and salt boxes, and the owner looked up and down these two aisles, and he said, “I know I’ve got some mustard here somewhere. Oh yes, it’s in the cellar.” So Bill followed him down to the cellar, and sure enough, he found a jar of mustard off to the side, but there were still more bags of salt and boxes of salt everywhere! His inventory was little other than salt. Bill said, “Say, you must sell a lot of salt in this store.” The guy said, “Nope, nah, I can’t sell much salt, but the feller who sells me salt, now he can sell salt!”

I’m going to sell you a new understanding on this old story. First, you need to know that the kingdom of God does not show up or the kingdom of Heaven, these two phrases are interchangeable in the New Testament, that phrase does not really show up in the Old Testament, the Old Testament being 80% of your Bible. In Jesus’ teaching, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven shows up more than 100 times. It must be important. Even if in our personal faith and theology, it is as small as a mustard seed, it must be important. In his parables, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God in many different ways. He said that the kingdom is like a farmer, a mustard seed, some yeast, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, a fishnet, an employer, a king inviting people to a marriage feast, or ten young women, some with oil for their lamps and some without. He also spoke of the glad tidings of the kingdom and of the mystery of the kingdom of God, which was present in their midst during the teachings and the healings of Jesus. Well, two things we can know, though some of it is confusing. One, it is something that came upon the earth with Jesus’ ministry, and two, it is something still beginning, still growing, and not yet fully come. One, the kingdom came with Jesus, and two, there is more to come. Now, this is not a talk about Heaven, this is not a talk about up there with God

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after we die, this is different. There is something that came when God's will was lived out on the earth in the life of Jesus Christ. We saw the difference between God's will and our selfish will when we saw the way that Jesus lived, the way that Jesus taught, the way Jesus had compassion, the way that Jesus gave his life out of love for you and me. In all of this, the kingdom of God has come near, but more is coming. And one more thing is clear about the kingdom of God; it came at God's initiative and not ours. We can join in, but when we do, when we do, God will change us. When we join up with God, when we, as Paul puts it, become a living temple of God's Holy Spirit, God begins from that moment to change us, to heal us from the spiritual disease of sin, and from the life-stopping fear of death. It starts with small beginnings, like a mustard seed, but a bit at a time, God's kingdom growing within you, God's spirit, as you are the temple of the Holy Spirit, begins to grow and change you into what you were meant to be. Don't worry that the change seems so slow and so small. Luther once said, "When God begins a thing, it always looks as if nothing will come of it." Imagine all the examples of small beginnings. That seems to be the way that God works. A float away, basket baby becomes Moses, revealer of the law. A teenage mother, Mary, found pregnant before it was time, who was almost divorced by Joseph, her betrothed, these two became the parents of the Messiah, and Jesus the Christ, disappointed many when he rejected their expectation to raise an army and kick out the Romans. Instead, he just dies! He dies, hanging there, forgiving the people who nailed him on that cross! After all the talk of bringing in the kingdom of God, he just dies. After all the high hopes in the hearts of the disciples, he just dies, nailed to that cross! You can't get much smaller than what the earth expects of the influence of a dead man, but there's more. There is always more. Healing was a big sign of the kingdom of God in Jesus' ministry. Jesus left the blind seeing. He left a man called Legion, who had to be bound up, in his right mind. He left a trail of evidence that God had a plan that disease and disorders were not a part of that plan. In fact, when he forgave the woman caught in the very act of adultery, who was about to be stoned, he taught in that moment that she was to go and sin no more. Neither was sin, nor broken covenants, nor presumptuous judgments meant to be a part of God's kingdom. In the cross, Jesus taught us that even death was not meant to be a part of God's plan. Scripture says that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, in First Corinthians 15. In tiny bits and pieces, Jesus revealed what the kingdom of God was meant to be, and surprisingly, he was also teaching at the same time what we were meant to be. Jesus uses that mustard seed language to teach about two distinct things. He says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny, small seed that grows and becomes unexpectedly huge, and in a second way, several times, Jesus says if you only had the faith as big as a mustard seed, you could do huge unexpected things. You see, two different, but related teachings. The kingdom starts small, and becomes huge. Your faith is small, but small, even like a mustard seed small, is enough if you only grow in it and use it.

Talk about small, I'm going to change gears here and hope this makes sense. I have to occasionally justify my biology degree from Wofford from the pulpit. I'm going to try. If I get something wrong here, you M.D.'s and nurses among us will certainly correct me. But talk about small, we all begin physical life as an undifferentiated cell mass, tiny,

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nothing impressive, nothing organized, nothing recognizable, and if we do not implant in the womb and grow, we stop right there. Connected to nourishment, different cells following the DNA blueprint begin to grow. They begin to grow organ systems, and to move from being nothing in particular to very specialized and peculiar cells, each grouping and growing into a harmony of synergy and cooperation that at about three months begins to function as a whole with a beating heart of its own, and then, merely grows from that moment of quickening until delivery and birth. It's interesting. It's interesting to note that theologians from a former time used to use the word “quickening,” the quickening that we talk about when the baby begins to move and the heart begins to beat, theologians used to use that word to describe a coming to faith, and the beginning of spiritual growth. God's spirit, putting us in our right minds. God's spirit, growing our love and faith larger and larger and larger. Growth does not stop the moment we are born in a physical sense. A just-born baby is still not much more than potential. In faith, growth and formation continue as well. I like to think that there is also a sort of spiritual DNA, a path we travel by which we were meant to differentiate ourselves as we move further and further into God's kingdom. I think the first hint of that path is the law, and by the law, I mean basically the Ten Commandments, which boil down to, Jesus said, love God and love your neighbor. That's the bare bones spiritual DNA upon which the kingdom of God grows.

Now, my daughter Allison has a growing baby in her right now. It's on my mind. It showed up in my sermon. Before, now this was before I knew she was expecting, I was soldering something. Many of you know that electronics is a hobby of mine. I was soldering something, and you use lead and tin based solder, and she said, “Dad, what are you doing?” She walked way into the back yard. I didn't know she was pregnant at the time, and for a man of normal intelligence, her extreme caution around molten lead smoke should have let the cat out of the bag, but not me. I just said, “I've been soldering for years, and the lead smoke has never hurt me none! Huh, huh!” She said, “Yeah, right, before breathing all that lead you must have been smarter than you are now.” Now, that's a compliment, I think. Isn't it? I don't know. She was afraid of environmental toxins, and that is prudent. In a physical way, when toxic substances enter our body, bad things happen. When some toxins or radiation or free radicals pass through us, our actual, physical DNA can become distorted, and we may develop cancer. I believe that living too much in the world as opposed to God's kingdom is very like a spiritual cancer. After awhile, we lose our way, and we forget the sensitivity we once had for the feelings and for the worth of others around us. We may become bitter and angry and more self-centered and impatient and bored with all the broken promises of everything we've tried and everything that has failed, and maybe we even give up hope. Our spiritual DNA can become corrupted and distorted. The way and the path of loving God and loving neighbors cease to be our way and ceases to be our path. Sin distorts, and each of us has different examples of how sin can distort even a good thing into something harmful or negative or even death dealing. Food, for example. Food in proper context and mixture and amount is good, but food can become a death-dealing, life-stealing excess. Sex is meant to be a blessing within the covenant of marriage and a way to procreate, to cooperate with the creation, with God. This is a positive good, and it connects us to

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future generations, but it can also become a death-dealing obsession. Sin distorts and so on and so on. We might still use the words about God and gospel, but we can live our lives by the slogan of my way or the highway, trust no one, touch no one, alone, alone, sadly, alone, and that is the big lie of evil. That is the big lie of evil. Evil tells us that we are alone. Evil tells us that we can never change. Evil tells us that we can never trust, we can never hope again, and that is a lie. The cross of Christ addresses this lie by making even death a hopeful thing. Certainly, God can handle any event in life. Faith, even small faith, as small a faith as a mustard seed, knows that God can handle any life event, even your sin, your spiritual dis-ease, and even death itself, the very last enemy of God. Yes, it is part of the good news that God forgives, and yes, it is part of the good news that God has overcome death on our behalf, but do not stop there! Do not reduce Christianity to a free pass to real estate in the clouds! No! There's more! Just as the kingdom of God is in your midst, so is God's Holy Spirit in your midst and within you. John Wesley used a big theological word for this. He said sanctification. Made simple, it means you can change now. You can get that blueprint back. You can by God's spirit undo the corrupted map and get the blueprint back. You can undo the habits of sin and the despair of being alone, and reclaim the hope and the inner peace and the spiritual help that God wants for you and me. Real change. Internal heart soul change is possible. With even mustard-seed faith, soul change is possible. The kingdom grows within us, and it shows in our lives. We can become a home for what God wanted from the beginning. We will have full knowledge of good and evil, but with God's spirit within, we also have the power to choose the good, the power to live in this world, but not give over to despair, the power to live in this world, but not allow good desires to become corrupted and distorted. We can live in this world, but no longer be completely of this world. Instead, as God's kingdom grows within us, we become filled with what Wesley calls “pure disinterested love.” Wesley believed that we could progress and love until love became completely devoid of self or selfishness or people in my family or my country or my denomination or like me, that it became a pure disinterested love for all human kind. If selfishness defines sin, then holiness is best defined as pure disinterested love for all humanity. No hate, no bitterness, no death-dealing lust remains. That is the aim of sanctification. That is the work of God's Holy Spirit. That is what happens when you allow even the smallest of faiths to grow. I hope I have sold you on a deeper meaning of the kingdom of God and mustard-seed faith. By that faith and by God's Holy Spirit, you become the salt of the earth. Salt, which preserves what is good and reveals what God intended life to look like from the very beginning. We all have a long way to go, each of us, a long way to grow, and so I appeal to you as the apostle Paul did to the Romans in Romans 12:1 and 2. He said, “I appeal to you therefore brethren by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, this is your spiritual worship.” Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, what is acceptable, and what is perfect. The seed of faith, the seed of the gospel is within you. You can know, and by the Holy Spirit, you can grow in that faith. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. You have been blessed by that power. Grow in it, and be a blessing to others. Amen.