



October 17, 2014

Dear Mission Personnel,

**Matthew 13:31-32** - He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

I, like many, appreciate a good underdog story. Who doesn't like the story of the plucky, go-getter who has been overlooked, that gets to rise to the occasion and save the day? In some ways, the above parable from the Gospel of Matthew seems like it fits this model of an underdog story. We hear about the mustard seed, which "is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree."

That's sounds like an underdog right? And for the most part, when I have heard this story in the past I have interpreted the story pretty literally, that the mustard seeds grow into a pretty significant tree. One doesn't have to search very hard to see images from church bulletins with the text of this scripture over the backdrop of a large tree. I understood this story to state that the Kingdom of Heaven will start small, but grow into something mighty. There is only one problem with this understanding - the tiniest of seeds growing into a strong, massive tree isn't really what this parable is talking about.

The reality is that the mustard plant, at best, grows into what could be considered a bush, not a tree. If Jesus had wanted to use the image of a mighty tree, he might have referenced the Cedar of Lebanon, which is used frequently throughout the Bible. Even the olive tree could have been an example that many of the original listeners could have related to as a tree of some substance. The original audience of this parable would have understood that the mustard plant, as an example of a Kingdom of Heaven, was not something large and substantial. It wasn't even something that would have been seen as desirable. Mustard plants would have been seen by many as a pervasive weed that can quickly grow out of control.

So what then is Jesus suggesting that the Kingdom of Heaven will be like if it isn't something small that will grow into something substantial? If we envision a fast growing shrub, that is growing on top of itself, inter-tangled, winding together to become thick and big enough so that it can be the home to birds, who are themselves loud and squawking, bumping into each other, wrestling for space, food and shade, then we begin to discover what Jesus is suggesting in this parable the Kingdom of Heaven will be like. It will be messy, loud and unexpected. The Kingdom of Heaven will be a community, living close, inter-tangled lives. Our lives and our interactions with each other will be messy, unpredictable and surprising. There will be challenges, there will be bumps, there will be confusion and frustration. But there will also be a place, that maybe doesn't look like what we would expect, but we will be welcoming and accepting.

I find this more encouraging than the other view of the Kingdom of Heaven. It reminds me that one's life in faith will be messy and not without its challenges. It will be unexpected and unpredictable. It will also be a home that we are all welcomed into. May we each be encouraged in our ministries to find ways to welcome others into the messiness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In Christ,

*Ben Albers*

