

Parables Old and New

July 24, 2011

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The last several weeks we have been listening to the parables of Jesus. We have all heard them, probably more than once. But I wonder how many of us have really taken the time to think about their meaning or to really understand what Jesus was trying to say? Sure we know about the mustard seed...it starts off small and grows into a big tree, like a little bit of faith can increase when nurtured or how Jesus came from humble beginnings, being born in a stable in a small town to human parents, yet became a great teacher and the Savior of the world. Something small can become something great. We can't really relate to these parables too much as none of us are farmers from the time of Jesus nor do we bake our own bread like the women of that time did. Jesus used parables to teach people in way they could understand. He also used things that would catch their attention. You see, no Jewish farmer in his right mind would plant a mustard seed in his field. It would grow into a great bush as big as a tree, sometimes 12 or 15 feet tall. It could take over everything in a garden. The birds would come to nest in it and eat the seeds, not only of the tree but the other seeds and plants in the field. I can just see the people's

reaction when he said “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.” They must have looked at him like he was crazy...but...he got their attention.

Let’s look a little closer at this parable. The little mustard seed, while not the smallest of all seeds, was still very small...so small in fact, that it was used as a comparison by the people of that time to paint a picture of just how small something was, much like we say something is “as big as a house” to illustrate how large something is. The mustard seed represents the small beginnings of the church which started with the Word of God. The farmer who planted the seed is meant to represent the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, and the field is the world or us. Some bible scholars say that the branches of the tree represent the different denominations and religious institutions in the world. The birds that nest in the branches are said by some to represent false prophets or demons sent to infiltrate the church, deceive the believers and rob them of the truth. We know that Jesus started the church with just 12 disciples and it has grown into something bigger than we could ever imagine. It must have seemed like a daunting task to them at the time...changing the world one person at a time...but look what they have done!

I wanted to find a modern day parable of the mustard seed...something that we could relate to. Now, the youth may not find this interesting but those of us who grew up without cable tv, VCRs, answering machines or the internet probably will. Who has a smart phone or a blackberry? Well, besides the obvious, making phone calls, I can send and receive text messages and pictures, it is my calendar, my address book, a calculator and a GPS. I can play games, read a book, take notes or listen to music. It is my alarm clock, MP3 player, answering machine and camera. I can get my email, surf the internet, program my DVR and monitor my home security system. But, like the parable of the mustard seed, it also has a negative aspect. People don't communicate like they used to or they text other people while they are socializing, kids aren't learning to spell, people get hurt or die in accidents from texting or talking while driving. All of that from this little piece of metal and plastic. So I can say that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a little computer chip that is placed into a plastic shell of a phone which then becomes a very useful piece of electronic equipment. That is really isn't shocking to many of us though. So, maybe we could say that Kingdom of Heaven is like the AIDS virus that infected one person and spread until hundreds of thousands were infected. You are saying "What? Are you nuts...comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to AIDS?"

That was shocking to hear but I got your attention, didn't I? Now that is how the people would have reacted to Jesus when he told His parable. The point is that something small can become something great, not great in the sense that it is necessarily good but that it can become something with such great influence on the world.

The parable of the leaven is related to the parable of the mustard seed in that both of them can be taken as predictions about how the church would grow and as warnings about what would happen in the church. Let's look at this parable. First, we need to understand what leaven is. I used to think it was yeast but it isn't really. Leaven is actually a small piece of dough left over from the last baking that has been left to ferment. Pretty disgusting, isn't it? Leaven carried a negative implication for the Jews of that time. In preparation for the Feast of the Passover, a Jewish family had to remove every bit of leaven from the house and burn it because to them it stood for something evil. Some say it represents the doctrine of man being mixed with the word of God, corrupting it and the church as well. The point of this parable though, is not that leaven is evil but that a little bit of it can change the nature of a whole baking. Bread baked without leaven was dry and hard and just not very good to eat, while

adding that little bit of leaven to a new batch of dough produced a soft, appetizing loaf, or many loaves. So it is with the coming of God's Kingdom. It started out as something very small, like the mustard seed, with one man and 12 disciples, has grown to a great body of believers, like the seed grows into a large bush, and, like the leaven transforms the dough, it has the power to transform lives.

I think that we can apply these parables to our lives today so that we can help in growing the kingdom. A small act of kindness done for someone. Maybe a smile you gave to that cranky person in the checkout lane at the grocery store or the door you opened for the person in the wheelchair or the meal you helped to serve to the homeless at the shelter. It was a small, insignificant act to you but it may have meant the world to that person. In fact, it could have changed his life. Let me tell you a story about 2 young men named Mark and Bill.

Mark was walking home from school one day when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all of the books he was carrying, along with two sweaters, a baseball bat, a glove and a small tape recorder. Mark knelt

down and helped the boy pick up the scattered articles. Since they were going the same way, he helped to carry part of the burden. As they walked Mark discovered the boy's name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball and history, and that he was having lots of trouble with his other subjects and that he had just broken up with his girlfriend. They arrived at Bill's home first and Mark was invited in for a Coke and to watch some television. The afternoon passed pleasantly with a few laughs and some shared small talk, then Mark went home. They continued to see each other around school, had lunch together once or twice, then both graduated from junior high school. They ended up in the same high school where they had brief contacts over the years. Finally the long awaited senior year came and three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could talk.

Bill reminded him of the day years ago when they had first met. "Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?" asked Bill. "You see, I cleaned out my locker because I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mother's sleeping pills and I was going home to commit suicide. But after we spent some time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had killed myself, I would have missed that time

and so many others that might follow. So you see, Mark, when you picked up those books that day, you did a lot more, you saved my life."

-John W. Schlatter (true story)

Never underestimate the power of your actions. You could be like the farmer and plant the seed that could grow into a great faith or the leaven that could transform someone's life. You may not ever see the fruits of your labors but don't let that stop you from sharing your faith, lending a hand, giving a smile. You never know whose life you may be touching or what impact it may have. I was thinking this morning about my mother taking me to church all those years ago and wondered if she ever imagined that we would be here today, with me standing up here preaching. But, she planted the seed.

I found a story by an unknown author...it is called the Sioux Indian Story that I'd like to share it with you.

"My grandfather took me to the fish pond on the farm when I was about seven, and he told me to throw a stone into the water. He told me to watch the circles created by the stone. Then he asked me to think of myself as that stone person.

"You may create lots of splashes in your life but the waves that come from those splashes will disturb the peace of all your fellow creatures," he said.

"Remember that you are responsible for what you put in your circle and that circle will also touch many other circles. You will need to live in a way that allows the good that comes from your circle to send the peace of that goodness to others. The splash that comes from anger or jealousy will send those feelings to other circles. You are responsible for both."

That was the first time I realized each person creates the inner peace or discord that flows out into the world. We cannot create world peace if we are riddled with inner conflict, hatred, doubt, or anger. We radiate the feelings and thoughts that we hold inside, whether we speak them or not. Whatever is splashing around inside of us is spilling out into the world, creating beauty or discord with all other circles of life.

- Unknown

So again I say to you, never underestimate the power of your actions. With one small act you can change a person's life. You could be like the farmer and plant the seed that could grow into a great believer or the leaven that could change a life. Look what one man with 12 faithful followers accomplished. Do you think that they had any idea how big the church would become? There will always be those who try to deceive us and turn us away from the Kingdom but if we have

faith, and we nurture and share that faith, it will grow so great that nothing can separate us from the love of God. So what part will you play in this parable? Are you the mustard seed growing into something great? Or the farmer who plants the seed? Maybe you are the leaven that transforms? We all have a part to play....what will yours be?