

Parable of the Mustard Seed by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
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Scripture: Matthew 13:31-32

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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. The Key to the Kingdom

Have you ever held something small, seemingly insignificant, yet capable of transforming everything? Perhaps it was a newborn child held in your arms or an engagement ring on your finger. Jesus tells us that something in God’s Realm exists that, though small, is capable not only of transforming our lives but creating entire realms of possibility where we thought there were none.

Considering the multiple threats our world faces in the coming years – from runaway climate change to unrestrained global warfare to political and social breakdown – can’t we all use a little of what Jesus speaks of? It would be great even to have help addressing more immediate challenges, like recovering from two hurricanes!

This morning, I invite you on a journey – a journey to find the clue and then use it to unlock a secret hidden in plain sight.

Jesus’s Parable of the Mustard Seed contains a mystery that is often missed by everyone except botanists or gardeners. Jesus claims that the Realm of God is like a mustard seed that is the tiniest of seeds yet grows into “the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” Here’s the problem: mustard plants are shrubs, not trees. According to the first-century historian Pliny the Elder, mustard plants are more like tall weeds that are hard to eradicate once they take hold. They don’t grow into trees, as Jesus implies.

If you search for “mustard tree” online, you might find images of the “toothbrush tree,” sometimes called a mustard tree. But this tree is not related to the mustard plant Jesus referred to. His first-century audience, familiar with mustard plants in Israel, would have known this.

So, did Jesus’s listeners smirk at the absurdity of a mustard seed growing into a tree? Did they accuse him of bad botany or horrific herbology? Perhaps. But it’s far more likely that *we* are the ignorant ones, not Jesus or his audience.

Jesus's Jewish audience had all the context they needed to get that Jesus's mismatch was intentional. His audience knew their Hebrew Bibles. They knew, for instance, that the prophet Daniel once interpreted a dream for King Nebuchadnezzar that involved a tree that grew so large the birds of the air made nests in its branches, which was a prediction of the vast empire he would rule over. They knew that the prophet Ezekiel predicted that Israel herself would become a great and mighty nation, using the same metaphor of a giant tree whose branches provide refuge for the birds. Yet these were cedar trees in the prophetic literature, not mustard shrubs. Jesus is posing a subversive riddle to his audience by referring to mustard seeds rather than cedar seeds. The riddle goes like this:

What is so small that most people don't even see it, once it takes root, grows like a weed that not even the Roman Empire can eradicate?

We know, of course, that the faith of Jesus eventually took over the Roman Empire, much to everyone's surprise. But what power did his followers have access to that toppled the Roman government without raising a single sword?

If we can solve this riddle, we might just find a power great enough to meet the threats we face in the modern world. Wouldn't it be nice to find it?

Thankfully, Jesus offers a clue to what the mustard seed really is elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel. He says that, if you have _____ the size of a mustard seed, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'" (Matt 17:20) Do you remember what the _____ is?

It's faith. Not just any kind of faith. But if you have it, even a tiny amount can overcome even the largest obstacles before you.

Many preachers might stop here, concluding, "Just have a little faith, and everything will turn out alright." But I can't end there because this conclusion feels overly simplistic. If all it took was having "a little faith" to get what we wanted, my books would be NYT Bestsellers. If "a little faith" was all that was necessary to make us safe and secure from harm, my eldest daughter's brain cancer would have been cured long ago. Faith is powerful, but the results often differ from our expectations.

Can you think of times when a little faith did make all the difference in your life, even if it did not yield the specific outcome you expected?

II. The Very Smallest Grows the Very Greatest

There is a profound difference between faith and belief. Understanding this distinction is crucial to grasping Jesus's teachings on faith. Belief stems from accepting something as true because you've been told so, even if you haven't experienced it yourself. As such, beliefs often change—either because they no longer align with our lived experiences or

because we lose trust in their source. Faith, however, is fundamentally different. Faith is built on trust, specifically trust validated through direct experience.

For example, I once believed that God had to sacrifice Jesus to forgive my sins. I believed it because someone told me it was true. But when I experienced God's grace and forgiveness for myself, it became clear who killed Jesus. Not God, but us. That humanity could be forgiven for such an act only underscores how much greater God's grace and forgiveness is than our own. So, my experience of God obliterated my old beliefs and replaced those beliefs with faith. Faith soon transformed my beliefs and led me to trust in God's love more profoundly than ever before.

This brings us to the heart of the matter: What kind of experience can create faith so potent that it can obliterate any false power that stands in its way, or even an empire?

Consider the story of 40 Roman soldiers in the city of Sebasté during Emperor Licinius's persecution of Christians in the early 4th century. These soldiers were sentenced to death for professing faith in Jesus. Their punishment? Death by freezing. On a frigid night, they were marched naked onto a frozen pond and told that anyone renouncing their faith could warm themselves in a hot bath at the pond's edge. Otherwise, they would remain on the ice until death claimed them.

After an hour, one soldier could endure no longer. He renounced his faith and leapt into the bath, leaving 39 Christians on the ice. Yet, by morning, 40 martyrs lay on the ice. What happened? One of the guards, moved by what he witnessed, removed his armor and joined the Christians in their fate.

What did this guard see that was so compelling he chose to embrace death over allegiance to the Emperor? He likely saw 39 Christians grappling with a profound crisis, at least at first. Stripped of all hope that their faith could save them, they faced the harsh reality that their beliefs had led them to this icy death. These folks might have initially converted to Christianity based on the belief that it would lead to freedom and joy. Yet here they were, imprisoned and dying for their beliefs. It's possible – even probable – that they doubted, wondering if this Jesus faith had all been one big mistake. Renouncing their faith offered a way out. It offered life, family, and security – not to mention warmth!

Yet, in the face of despair, only one soldier sought refuge in the bath. The others remained on the ice. Why?

I believe they stayed for the same reason you and I show up to church despite your own trials. Your faith hasn't spared you from hurricanes, illness, betrayal, or injustice, yet you continue to seek God's presence.

Out on that ice, when every cherished belief collapsed, faith found those early Christians. A particular kind of faith – not conjured by human will or wishful thinking – but one born of direct encounter with the Holy. They experienced a Presence – a

profound awareness that embraced them even when they thought all hope was lost. It assured them that all was well, even though nothing seemed okay. This fleeting, yet transformative, experience connected them to something real and eternal.

Like gold forged in the collapse of stars, this faith emerged from unimaginable pressure and pain. It became a treasure more valuable than life itself, spreading like an unstoppable force. That one soldier who joined the 39 witnessed joy too deep for words, assurance greater than any threat, and peace that passes all understanding. Though neither this soldier nor the other 39 lived to tell the story of their experience, those who witnessed what happened did tell of it, perhaps becoming converts themselves.

It was experiences like these that caused Christian faith to grow like a weed no matter how hard the Romans worked to eradicate it. Converts experienced a God who shows up even after all hope has been lost, inspiring a faith born of direct experience rather than wishful thinking or second-hand testimony. They experienced a joy that ran so deep that they chose to risk their lives to follow Jesus rather than playing it safe in service to the Old Dominion.

Today, amid global challenges and personal hardships, it may feel like we're all standing on thin ice. But here is the good news: If your struggles cause you to lose faith, faith has not lost you. The tiniest glimpse of God's loving presence, unbidden and unexpected, can transform everything.

This mustard-seed faith doesn't promise to eliminate hardship but assures us of God's presence through it. It empowers us to face fear with courage and creativity, rather than cowering in fear or curling up in despair.

As the saying goes, "Since we're all standing on thin ice, we may as well dance." This week, this year – will you cower before your challenges, or will you dance like there's no tomorrow, even if tomorrow never comes?

The next time your fears threaten to overwhelm you or your challenges threaten to overcome you, don't resist or deny the feelings that well up within you. Just don't close your eyes or your heart to the God who shows up, inviting you to dance.