

**Stepping Forward to a Better Life:
Making the Most of Small Beginnings**

Matthew 13:31-35

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How does one explain the unexplainable, describe the indescribable, or comprehend the incomprehensible? Such was the challenge facing Jesus as he attempted to paint a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven to us mere mortals. So Jesus resorted to telling parables, earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Instead of trying to tell it like it is, Jesus told it like it might be: the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, a little bit of leaven, a treasure hidden in the field, a pearl of great price, a dragnet of fish. Let those who have ears to hear spiritual things be alert to these little similes of Jesus.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS SMALL, LIKE A MUSTARD SEED.

A seed which when planted grows to be the largest of garden plants, large enough for birds of the air to perch in its branches.

Now technically speaking, Jesus was not right about the mustard seed being the smallest of seeds, and a mustard tree held no comparison to the great cedars of Lebanon to which this Psalmist refers in Psalm 104. Such is the predicament of those who want to over analyze the parables. The parables were not told to be picked apart but held together as a faint picture of something unimaginable. It's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning so suffice it to say:

- 1) Mustard seeds are small, more tiny than the sand of the sea.
- 2) Mustard trees are tall enough to give birds shade on hot sultry days.
- 3) The Kingdom of Heaven, the rule of God, the new order of a better world, that is now but not yet, here but still to come, present but not complete, is small like a mustard seed but offering us the kind of comfort that one would search for in a place of shade and rest on a hot, sultry day.

We who worship big buildings, big stores, big stadiums, big churches; we who chant to the mantra that "bigger is always better," might want to pay attention to the parable about the power of a tiny mustard seed.

C.S. Lewis says, "The best thing about Christianity is that nobody could have guessed it." We have our Messiah born in a stable. We have our King ride into town on a donkey. We crucify our Lord on a cross. We convert the world with a handful of fishermen and a couple of tax collectors. How odd of God not to use our methods of promoting the Gospel.

Never let us underestimate the infinitude of the little. In a drop of water there is a city with tides of traffic flowing through its streets. In a drop of blood there is a battleground with a marshaled host of red and white cells. In a seed lies a mustard tree, where all kinds of us birds can find rest for our souls.

Jesus himself said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. For nothing is impossible with God" (Matthew 17:20). Let those who have ears to hear, hear!

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS SILENT, LIKE LEAVEN IN BREAD.

Leaven that a woman mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.

I have been down in Brownsville, Tennessee the last eight days preaching the Tabernacle Camp Meeting. They hold worship services three times a day. I was expected to preach two of those services every day. You do the math. I confessed that I did not have that many good sermons. On the last night, a few honest souls came up and agreed with me! The only thing that tops the preaching is the eating. You eat three huge meals a day and then join another family for dessert each night. It all reminded me of my mother's Sunday dinners. The best thing I remember most about those Sunday dinners were the "yeast biscuits." As George Pernell up in Simpsonville says about his country sausage, "Those biscuits were goooooood." And Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like that.

Leaven or yeast, does its work silently. A small amount of leaven placed in dough makes the whole loaf rise. It is not with swords loud clashing, nor the roll of stirring drums, but with those silent deeds of love and mercy, that the heavenly kingdom comes. How silently God is at work in the world.

Jesus said, "The hypocrites love their pretty prayers prayed standing in the synagogue or even on a street corner. They have their reward. But when you pray, go to the room and close the door, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will listen to you. How silently, how silently the Kingdom of God is given. And in our noisy world we would be smart to listen. Let those who have ears to hear, hear!

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS SURPRISING, LIKE A BURIED TREASURE THAT A FARMER FOUND IN THE FIELD.

In his joy he went and sold all that he had and bought the field. In Jesus' day, the safest place to keep your money and your valuables was in the ground. You didn't put your treasures in a bank; you buried them in the earth. The only problem was that you had to remember exactly where you left them. One person's forgetfulness in this story becomes another person's fortune. It is not the luck of the plow but the wisdom of the farmer that is to be noted here. He sold all he had and bought this treasure that he found in the field. It came as a total surprise;

plowing down a furrow he runs into something and digs it out, and there is a box and it is full of a treasure.

Professor and story teller Fred Craddock swears this conversation took place. He was visiting a family up in Connecticut when he found himself alone in the living room with an old greyhound dog, a dog that the family explained once raced professionally down in Florida. So as Fred tells it, I took the opportunity to strike up a conversation with that old dog. "I heard you retired," said Fred to the dog. "Is that what they told you?" replied the dog. "Well, I didn't retire; I spent 10 years running around that track, day after day, race after race, chasing that rabbit. Then one day I got close enough to get a good look at the thing. It was then I discovered that rabbit was a fake. I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit. I didn't retire, I quit!"

If you are tired of plowing the same old ground, chasing the same fake rabbit, enduring the same routine, wake up, be alert, watch! The Kingdom of Heaven, the greatest treasure on earth, may be closer than you think. You, who have ears to hear, hear!

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS PRICELESS, LIKE A FINE PEARL.

A pearl, which a merchant had searched for all his life, and when he finally found it, he sold everything he had and bought it. The treasure for the farmer was a surprise. The pearl for the merchant was the end of a long search. He had dealt in pearls; he knew a good pearl from a bad pearl. He had searched all his life for that special pearl, the one that was more valuable, more important, that went beyond anything else he had ever seen. When he found it, he gave up everything he had to buy it.

In Tennyson's tale of the Holy Grail, a knight searches high and low for that which lasts for eternity and gives ultimate meaning. He comes upon a singing brook, with deep meadows and wonderful fruit trees. But even as he ate the fruit, it turned to dust, for no feeding of the flesh could still his deepest hunger. Riding on, he saw a home, its opened door a promised welcome and in the door there was a beautiful woman, her eyes innocent and kind. Surely the love of a woman and the sweet shelter of home are my heart's desire, reasoned the knight; "But when I touched her, Lo! She too, fell into dust and nothing, and the house became no better than a broken shed." His soul still craving, he traveled on. He found a warrior clad in golden armor. But he also turned to dust. Then he came upon a city that sat upon a hill. Surely civic service and the affection of his fellow men will mean his journey's end. But when he reached the crest, there was neither city, man, nor any voice, so that he cried in grief. "Lo, if I find the Holy Grail itself, and touch it, it will crumble into dust."

Are you tired of chasing pretty rainbows? Are you tired of spinning round and round? Gather up all the broken dreams of your life and at the feet of Jesus, lay them down. Find the pearl of great price.

Will it be costly? Certainly! While you are counting the cost, consider the value. The merchant does not diversify his investments here. He sells all he has for that one priceless pearl. With all my heart I want to say, "It is worth it." You, who have ears to hear, hear!

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS MIXED, LIKE A NET OF FISH.

The problem with fishing is that you never know what you might catch. I caught a turtle the other day. I don't like catching turtles. They bite and claw and are almost impossible to get off the hook. I think turtles should stay on logs and leave my fishing line alone. But of course turtles never consult me.

Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net, not the Internet, although there are some similarities, but a dragnet, a seine as we used to call it, let down in the water capable of dragging anything in its way to shore.

A friend lamented to me some years ago, "I've got to stop doing business with anybody I meet at church. I get burned every time." I have seen more than one single person get hurt in a relationship that they assumed to be safe because they met the person at church. You can find a real sucker at church as surely as you can catch one with a seine in the river.

The Kingdom of God is mixed. It is not up to the fish to do the sorting. The angels do that at the end of the day.

I was preaching out in Kansas several years ago in a shiny little Methodist church in a quaint little town. The custodian opened the doors just before time for service and quickly locked them as people left. "We like to keep things nice around here," explained the pastor. "And I always try to find a few fine new members each year to offset the losses. Things stay stable that way." The evangelism message in that church reminded me of the Marine Corp: "We could use a few good men." I never knew we were called to be selective about members. I thought whosoever will may come. Let the wheat and the weeds grow together, and the dragnet bring in whatever it may, there is plenty of time for sorting at the close of the day. Let those who have ears to hear, hear!

It is the Kingdom, said Jesus; it is all about the Kingdom. It is small like a mustard seed, silent like leaven, a surprise like a treasure found in a field, and as priceless as a precious pearl. While it may be mixed down here, wait for it, watch for it, work for it. It is worth more than everything you have.