

## **“Summer of Parables: Mustard and Yeast”**

*Matthew 13:31-35*

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Today we continue with our Summer of Parables at OPC and consider the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven. Last week I mentioned that it’s the surprise in the parables that most often leads us to the punchline. And maybe you’re thinking that today’s parables don’t really pack much punch. I mean, what’s the surprise in sowing a seed or making bread—the two most everyday things on earth. They are both totally everyday ordinary. Not much surprise here.

As I thought of mustard this week – more than a yellow bottle in the fridge—I was picturing brilliant yellow fields of blooming mustard. And then I was confused; the mustard I’ve seen grows about a foot high; it doesn’t at all resemble a tree. Apparently, in the Middle East there are two kinds of mustard. One is the modest plant that’s about a foot high. And the other is “black mustard”, which in perfect conditions grows into a shrub that’s four to eight feet tall.

And now we’re getting closer to the surprise. Jesus says, “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.”

Calling mustard a tree is really pushing it. Mustard is just one step ahead of being an ordinary weed. But Jesus offers the mustard a considerable upgrade—in Jesus it becomes a tree where the birds of the air find a home and build a nest. So if Jesus wanted to reference a good solid biblical tree, why not start with the seed of a towering oak of righteousness or a glorious cedar of Lebanon? If I was a bird building a nest, I know which I’d choose.

But Jesus chooses mustard—this scrubby shrub that Jews weren’t even eager to plant in their gardens. The first-century Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, describes mustard like this: “It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand, when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it...” So, instead of an oak, Jesus makes an unrelenting near-weed the starting point for his vision of the Kingdom of God. Now that’s surprising! Here is when we begin to scratch our heads—as we are supposed to. This is the genius of Jesus’ storytelling.

Like the mustard seed, Jesus’ comparison of God’s Kingdom to yeast was also surprising to a first-century Jewish audience. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Metaphorically, yeast, had a negative connotation. The term “yeast” or “leaven” shows up about a dozen other

places in the New Testament, and on each occasion hints of something whose taste is a bit off. Jesus says that the leaven “of the Pharisees” is to be avoided. Paul uses “yeast” to describe the negative effects of boasting.

The term of “yeast” here is not referring to those little yellow packets of cultured yeast that sit in our refrigerators, but rather to a sourdough starter mix—which as you know can sometimes turn rather nasty. Leaven was customarily regarded as a symbol for corruption, decay and thus evil. To compare God’s imperial rule to leaven is to compare it to something corrupt and unholy, just the opposite of what God’s rule is supposed to be. Jesus’ use of leaven would certainly have gotten a rise out of his hearers! Jesus use of leaven is both striking and provocative.

Jesus’ own ministry was not met with universal appeal. Distain for Jesus and his ministry has already emerged in the chapters leading up to these two parables. Jesus was already seen by some as a bad weed—or as corrupted leaven. The culmination of these views would lead to Jesus’ arrest, trial and to the cross. Jesus’ own ministry and his portrayal of the Kingdom of God are certainly in stark contrast to the glorious connotations of power, triumph, and victory that people generally associated with the arrival of the Kingdom of God—when all would immediately be set right. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into town—not on a mighty war horse—but on a humble donkey. Jesus always made clear that the Kingdom of God was going to save and rescue this world precisely by virtue of its being so very different from the powerful, flashy, showy political kingdoms that otherwise capture our attention. Compared to all of that, God’s Kingdom looks as insignificant as a grain of mustard or a bowl of sour dough starter. Jesus spent much of his time with those whom most others considered marginal and unattractive. And what Jesus showed us through this way is that the Kingdom can change hearts. It can change the world. It has changed the world.

Jesus knows that we are thirsty for change—transforming change in our world; transforming change in ourselves; transforming change in the church. But the way that that transforming change happened is less spectacular and impressive with its incremental, little by little change—like a growing seed or in leaven transforming flour. In both of these parables transforming change happens. In the first, a seed grows into a great healing shrub that shelters the creatures of the world—because despite its challenges, mustard can be used as a source of healing in the treatment of “snake or scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprous sores,” and other illnesses. And in the second, leaven transforms flour into life-giving abundant bread—bread enough for a great banquet. And the way this transforming change happens is not in an instant with glorious and impressive results—but by a seed being buried in the dirt and by leaven being hidden in flour. Through such everyday ordinary actions and decisions—the transforming change of the Kingdom begins and which over time can affect the kind of live-giving change that impacts on a great scale.

The centre of faith of Christians—Jesus says—is not up at the great and glorious temple. It's in the way that we each live our everyday lives at home, at work, at school and in the marketplace and community. Like everyday mustard and everyday leaven, the Kingdom of God is right there in the every day—transforming what seems like weedy and corrupted difficulties transforming them into something holy, healing, beautiful and nourishing. Just as a miracle seems to happen in Jesus' hands—when it came to a scrubby mustard plant becoming a great tree—so the Kingdom can transform our ordinary everyday lives into something with monumental impacts. Pay attention to the mundane everyday places, Jesus says. Notice how you speak to your spouse or your children. Be aware of how you talk to your neighbours. Prioritize time for God every day—even small beginnings of 5 minutes a day—can grow into something life-changing. These small changes in daily life make a great impact on the final outcome.

The Kingdom of God manifests itself in the modest changes in our attitudes and in the little improvements in our behaviour that no one may notice, including ourselves. The Kingdom is manifested in ordinary daily life and how we live it. With yeast and seed alone, one can do little but with bread and a plant much can be gained.

Someone asked Presbyterian preacher and writer, Eugene Peterson, what he would say if he were writing what he knew would be his very last sermon. Peterson replied, "I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, 'Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow, and how are you going to treat that person?'" Peterson suggested that we need to stop thinking that being a Christian means always being part of only obvious religious contexts. We need to pay attention to what the people around us are doing most every day and then help them to do it in ways that glorify God. "In my last sermon," Peterson said, "I guess I'd want to say, 'Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work (or school).'" This is what glory looks like.

God's glory is waiting to be poured out as a gift through you to the world. The world needs more glory. And from the very start the transmitters of such glory have not been a collection of ready-made saints, but unstable Peter, doubting Thomas, and me-first James and John. In other words—ordinary, salty people like us. The truth purpose of our lives is to help pull back the veil and display something of God's majestic glory to a watching world.