

“Hidden”

Matthew 13:31-35

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 6, 2013

What would it take to change the world? More specifically, how many people would you need to change the world? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions? Where would you start? History has shown over and over again that it often only takes a small number of people to bring about a big change. In the summer of 1776, the world was forever changed when the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, declared independence from Great Britain. That change really started with only three people: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. In all, only 56 men signed that historic document. But they changed the world.

In 1903, Samuel P. Langley, the head of the Smithsonian Institution, was attempting to develop the first manned airplane. He had a large staff of people designing and building his aerodrome as he called it. He was well funded with grants from the Smithsonian and from the War Department. And he failed in front of a large crowd of people including the press, government officials, and the public. Meanwhile, a couple of brothers from Ohio, tinkering in the back of their bicycle shop, designed, built and successfully flew the first airplane. Only a handful of people, mostly from the lifesaving station, were there to see it. But they changed the world.

In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew we have been studying these parables of Jesus that are usually called the Parables of the Kingdom. That's because in each parable Jesus gives us an illustration that explains something about his Kingdom. Most of them begin, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and he then gives us a comparison. In the first parable Jesus tells us that the Kingdom is like seeds sown on four different types of soil and that some will receive it and bear fruit and some will not. Then he tells us that the

Kingdom is like a field sown with wheat seed. But an enemy comes and plants weeds. Jesus is showing us that evil is a reality that will be in this world until the end of the age.

Now we come to these two short parables where he tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large tree and like yeast that is worked into flour to make bread.

In the first parable Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Obviously he is using some hyperbole, some literary license here to tell the story in a way that gets our attention. You can't point to this verse and say, "see, the Bible is full of errors. There are seeds smaller than the mustard seed and plants larger than the mustard plant, which doesn't grow into a tree."

The seed of the mustard plant is, however, very small – typically only about a millimeter – which is Jesus' point. It's really tiny. The plant is a rapid growing plant and will usually reach 8-10 feet tall in one growing season, and is capable of growing 12-15 feet tall. Now people who live in places with trees that grow 50-60 feet tall wouldn't consider 15 feet a tree. But we live in south Texas and so we have no trouble understanding how Jesus could call that a tree. But the mustard plant is really more like a large shrub with lots of branches and dense with leaves. But I think Jesus is also doing more here than describing a certain plant. I think he's pointing us back to the Old Testament where a tree with birds or animals in it is used as the symbol of a great kingdom. We find that image in Daniel 4, where the

tree represents Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. He dreams of a tree that reaches all the way to heaven and can be seen for miles away. Then he says, "the beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches." In our reading from Ezekiel we find a similar image except that the tree represents God's kingdom.

The point of this illustration is that the kingdom of heaven, like a tiny mustard seed, starts out small. But it grows into something great, even if it doesn't look like it at first. An interesting thing about the mustard plant is that it is almost like a weed. It is quick to germinate, grows rapidly, and once established is actually quite difficult to get rid of. Kind of like the kingdom of heaven. Following his baptism Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. At that point the kingdom of heaven on earth was just him. Then he began to call his disciples – an inner circle of twelve. Then there were others who followed him, seventy at one point. But Jesus was rejected by many and was eventually crucified. The beginning of the kingdom of heaven didn't look like much. It was like a tiny seed. But it grew.

For 300 years the Roman Empire did everything it could to wipe out Christianity. Historians now estimate that at the end of that time of persecution there were five to eight million Christians living in every corner of the Empire. Today the Christian faith is alive in almost every country in the world and is the largest religion. And although Christianity seems to be in decline in Western Europe and the United States, it is growing rapidly in South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and even the Middle East. The tiny mustard seed has grown into the largest of all the trees.

The second parable serves to reinforce the first one. Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." The point here is that the

kingdom is not always visible, but it is still working. Also, just like yeast worked into dough, the kingdom affects what's around it, transforming it. The Christian faith has affected almost every aspect of Western civilization. The idea of the university arose because of Christianity. Harvard, Princeton, Oxford all started as seminaries to train pastors and later taught others. Public schools were created to teach children to read the Bible. Christian compassion for others led to the formation of the first hospitals and modern science was only possible within Christianity. The kingdom of heaven, the gospel of Jesus Christ, transforms everything it touches.

One other comment about this parable. Like all the others it includes a surprise element, something we weren't expecting, like the unusually large mustard tree or the presence of tares in the wheat field. In this case it's the "three measures of flour." That's about 50 pounds. What Jesus is describing is enough bread to feed over a hundred people. It's a large feast, a banquet. That should remind us of the great banquet that Jesus prepares for us which we celebrate in the Lord's Supper.

So let's bring it closer to home. There are roughly 90 people who attend worship out of about 200 who are connected with this church. We look around and think, "what can 90 people do? How can so few people have an impact in our community much less our world?" In 1866, a small group of people here in Corpus Christi met to discuss building a Presbyterian Church and the next spring, May of 1867, this congregation was chartered with seven members. Seven. They began construction of a small, wood-frame building. But by August of that year Yellow Fever took the lives of a third of them, including the pastor. The wood for the building was used to build coffins. It was a tiny seed. But sixty years later there were almost 2000 members. In the last 145 years this church has had a

significant impact in Corpus Christ, around Texas and other parts of the United States, and in many places around the world.

More importantly, today we have the opportunity to plant kingdom seeds. We have the mission of being the yeast in our families, in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and in our government. Often it doesn't look like much. But God's kingdom transforms whatever it touches and we have the opportunity to be a part of that. We get to help transform the lives of children in Uganda who have lost one or both parents to the AIDS epidemic. We get to invest time

and love into inner-city children here in Corpus Christi who need help learning to read and who need to hear about the hope that comes from knowing Jesus. We get to plant the seeds of the gospel in the lives of homeless men who find their way to Mission 911 and with pregnant women who end up at the Pregnancy Resource Center. In other words, as Paul points in Philippians 1, we get to be partners in the Gospel, working with Christ. We get to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Amen