Parables That Preach: The Mustard Seed

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

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As students growing up in the great state of North Carolina, my eighth graders were not used to having very cold winters, which of course meant many years with very little snow. (This is why I get so excited when it snows here in Staunton. I am forever an 8th grader wishing for snow.) When it *was* cold enough to snow, we normally got about an inch of ice instead of snow which would only serve to paralyze the city and prolong the school year.

One day, however, while I was teaching, my students looked out the big window in my classroom and saw big, fat snowflakes coming down. “SNOW!!!” the kids shouted and ran to the window. (I admit I probably ran, too..). We crowded around the window and watched the snow coming down at a fast pace, increasing in intensity as time passed. I quickly realized that as long as the snow was coming down, or even as long as there was the hope of snow, there wouldn’t be much formal learning taking place in my classroom, not to mention the entire public school system of Durham. I stood back and watched my students watch the snow with glee. At one point, a student looked back at me, with a huge grin on his face and shouted, “Ms. Wolf – IT’S BLIZZARDIN’!!”

Now, growing up, I had heard stories of the blizzard in ‘78 and how horrible it was in Ohio for my dad and his family. I didn’t have the heart to tell Kendrick that this was nowhere near close to being a blizzard – and that in fact, he would be lucky if there was enough snow on the ground to build a snowman when he got home. But to Kendrick, seeing the swirls of white, fat snowflakes falling - it was blizzarding.

Like many middle-schoolers, Kendrick had perfected the art of hyperbole – the extreme exaggeration. It’s a form of figurative language that is often used to grab our attention. What it says, we don’t literally mean. We’re all perfectly capable of it – I haven’t slept for ten days; this book weighs a ton; I have a million things to do. These are all extreme exaggerations. We do not mean any of these things literally.

One way to interpret today’s parables is to say that Jesus is using hyperbole - extreme exaggeration as a way to illustrate a truth. As one commentator points out, a mustard seed can never become a tree - it will only ever become a bush. And yet, Jesus has just stated that the kingdom of of God is something that is (for our feeble minds) impossible. Perhaps Jesus is simply using hyperbole - extreme exaggeration to capture the disciples’ imagination. But, perhaps it is also possible that Jesus uses such extreme results in these parables because he is pointing to our call to believe in the impossible.

In a devotion based on today’s Gospel passage, the Reverend J. C. Austin points to this parable as a way that we can respond to horrific events that happen in our individual lives and in our world. Reverend Austin says that in times like those, we are called to pray - which he says seems like an incredibly unrealistic response.

He writes:

“Doesn’t seem like much, does it? In the midst of all that violence and anger and terror and hate, we should pray? We want something more than that: something concrete, something significant, something that we can do that will make a visible difference, something that will really change this world. Praying for peace is just not a realistic response.

But that’s a good thing, because being realistic is the last thing the world needs from us right now. Realistically, there’s nothing that you or I or anyone can do about any of this at all.”

Austin’s words seem a little pessimistic. “There’s nothing that you or I or anyone can do about any of this at all”? However, right when he had me doubting there could be any hope, he continues:

“Realistically, a bunch of pacifists could not have driven the British Empire out of India. Realistically, apartheid South Africa would have ended in a race war. Realistically, human beings are not very good at evaluating what is realistic, at what is effective, at what is possible.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

I love Rev. Austin’s call to prayer. I love that he sees this parable as a call to be unrealistic. A call to lean into hyperbole. Yes, realistically, none of those events should have ended the way they did. I once saw a map that showed which countries the British Empire had not at one point or other occupied. There are only 22. And the British Empire had a huge stake, economically, in India. So it makes absolutely no sense that the British Empire would give up their claim on India because of the actions of a bunch of pacifists.

And South Africa? A country in a continent that had been picked apart by the powers that were? A country that was primed for a terrifying race war - European against African? It made absolutely no sense that it would end in any other way. And yet, it did.

Yes. I like Rev. Austin’s call to prayer. The call to be unrealistic in our prayers.

But we can take Rev. Austin’s call to prayer one step further by adding our own (and oftentimes small) actions as a response to the way that God wants us to live.

One of my all-time favorite Bible verses is Micah 6:8. It’s the verse that my home church in Durham has adopted. The verse is read to the congregation at the beginning of each worship service. It’s written on our bulletins, on our t-shirts, and many who have grown up in the church have spent at least some portion of their adolescence considering the idea of a Micah 6:8 tattoo.

“What does the Lord require of you - but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Many versions of the Bible use the word “do” as in “do justice.” But I like the versions that use the word “seek.” Seeking involves being active. It’s the difference between “Hide and Seek” and “Hide and See What Comes Your Way.” It means living your life so that you are actively looking for ways in which you can bring about justice. It means going to school in a few weeks and looking for situations in which you can be a blessing to others. It means entering the cafeteria and looking around. Not just for your friends, but for others on the fringes, on the outsides and then doing something about it - sitting with them, inviting them to sit with you.

Loving kindness or as some interpretations put it - loving mercy - means showing mercy when you feel you’ve been wronged by someone. It means forgiveness if someone has used you to get ahead. It means turning the other cheek even when it would feel a little satisfying not to.

And finally, walking humbly with our God. In all of these actions, do them with humility. Remember, we are created in God’s image. To paraphrase John Calvin, “we recognize that knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are intertwined.”[[2]](#footnote-3) If we know justice and mercy to be a part of God, and if we then act as a reflection of God’s grace and mercy, then we will seek justice and love mercy, and we will do these actions, not with a feeling of self-righteousness, but with humble gratitude to the One who practices justice and mercy toward us.

One commentary explains, “The third item [walking humbly] is not a separate requirement ... the specific requirement is to do justice which is a way of loving mercy, which in turn is a manifestation of walking humbly with God.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Like the growth we see in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, if we practice these actions of justice and mercy, we will see growth.

Growth is what being a follower of Christ is all about — both personal growth in our relationship with God and growth in God’s kingdom — even when the world tells us that that kind of growth is unrealistic.

The growth portrayed in these first two parables would have been viewed as ridiculous, subversive, and unimaginable.

The yeast that the woman mixes into the flour would have to have been enough to make fifty pounds of flour rise. The woman in this parable isn’t making a loaf of bread for her family, or even a few loaves to give to some neighbors. This woman is making enough bread to make 100 loaves. And to the original audience of this parable, yeast is never the “good guy” in the Bible.

Hearing this parable, the disciples would have never cheered, “Yay, yeast! You make that dough rise!” On the contrary, in every other instance in the Bible in which yeast is featured, it is a symbol of corruption or evil.[[4]](#footnote-5) Following the flight from Egypt in which the Israelites did not have enough time to add yeast to let their bread rise, unleavened bread became a sign of membership for the Israelites. The lack of yeast was one of the ways that they were separate from the rest of the world. This parable, in which yeast is considered to be good and transformative in a positive way, would have completely shocked and surprised the disciples.

In a similar vein, one commentator suggests that the mustard planted in the first parable is comparable to kudzu — that green, ivy-like plant we see all over mountainsides in the South. Unlike ivy, however, which needs to be coaxed to grow along certain paths, kudzu makes a home for itself wherever it goes. And like uninvited family members, kudzu settles in for the long haul.

Kudzu is the bane of the South’s existence. Once planted, it grows completely unobstructed by anything. One website devoted to kudzu and its eradication (and yes, such websites exist) said that kudzu roots can grow as as deep as twelve feet in the ground and that it can take up to 10 years of specific herbicide use to get rid of it.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Kudzu is a common sight - especially here in the mountains. I remember driving across the state line into Tennessee for rafting trips each summer, completely amazed by the kudzu that took over barns, houses, entire mountains - hiding the ghost of what used to be. You could look at the shape of the kudzu and tell that it was covering a house, farm building, or even an old abandoned car. But you could only see hints of it. The kudzu had taken over.

Why would Jesus use such a plant - an annoying weed - or yeast - a traditional symbol of corruption - to describe the kingdom of heaven?

Today’s parables show us what will happen when we live as citizens of the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom that is both here right now and also not yet. In the Kingdom of God, the impossible will become reality. The smallest seed will grow beyond the expected shrub and continue on to become a tree big enough for birds to find shelter and to build nests. The smallest amount of yeast will be enough to make fifty pounds of flour rise and feed every single person.

Similarly, our quietest petitions and our smallest, seemingly insignificant actions can grow to be transformative events in the lives of others as well as within ourselves.

Jesus used parables to explain the kingdom of God to the disciples and to the crowds. The kingdom Jesus was proclaiming was a foreign concept to the people. They were expecting their Messiah to come in like a triumphant warrior - ready to free them from the oppression of Rome. Instead, they had Jesus - a man who broke most of their expectations. So as a way to familiarize the people with the kingdom, Jesus told parables. These parables used everyday items - a mustard seed, yeast, treasure, and pearls - and took those everyday items and transformed their worth.

In a few moments, we will have a time of prayer in which we ask God to be with us and with all of the people who are hurting around the world. For some of us, our prayers are every day items. They are the words we offer to God when we first wake up in the morning, or maybe randomly throughout the day, or if you’re like me, when you finally turn out the light next to your bed and silently go through your day, offering words of thanksgiving and petition.

The parables today tell us that these words are not random. Our prayers to God are not just rote activities that we perform. God hears our prayers and sees our actions - our determination to live out Micah 6:8 - seeking justice, loving mercy, walking humbly. God takes notice of this and through us and with God’s help, transformation is possible.

So, friends, is Jesus just being hyperbolic in today’s parables? I don’t think so. I don’t think these parables are extreme exaggerations of God or God’s kingdom. I think instead, these parables encourage us to believe the impossible - that something small and seemingly insignificant has the power to transform. Be it through our actions or through our prayers, God is a God of transformation - the results of which are often beyond our feeble comprehension.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. [www.fapc.org/pray](http://www.fapc.org/pray) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Migliore, Daniel L. Faith Seeking Understanding. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Mays, James. Micah. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Reid, Barbara E. Parables for Preachers. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [www.terr4incognita.wordpress.com](http://www.terr4incognita.wordpress.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)