

**Sermon: The Mustard Seed** by Julie Lombard

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The Mustard Seed parable is one that can be found in many places in the Bible. The Bible tells a historical account of religious stories both Jewish and Christian, but it is not always as accurate as the history books we read today. Some people believe, however, that if you find the same story more than once in the Bible, that it's a really good chance that it happened. The Mustard Seed is one of these stories because it is not only found in the Synoptic Gospels: The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It is also found in the Gospel of Thomas. Listen as we read each parable of the mustard seed. Listen to which parts of the story remain the same and which change.

**Gospel of Mark 4:30-32**

And Jesus said, *"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; and when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all the shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in their shade."*

**Gospel of Matthew 13:31-32**

Another parable [Jesus] put before them, saying. *"The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of the seeds, but it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

**Gospel of Luke 13:18-19**

[Jesus] said therefore, *"What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and cast in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nest in its branches."*

**Gospel of Thomas 20**

The disciples said to Jesus, *"Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like."* He said to them, *"It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for the bird of the sky."*

Each of these accounts claim that Jesus told a story about a mustard seed that is plain and simple to see. Each story emphasizes that from a small seed comes a large plant. Jesus says that this plant is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is hard to imagine something small growing into something so large, but babies can sometimes grow into tall people. Anyone who has planted a sunflower seed has experienced how it towers over a garden. So it's true, small seeds can grow into large plants. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the mustard plant is as large as a tree which can give shade and have room enough to host a bird's nest. It gives shelter and produces more seeds especially when it is planted in fertile ground. Jesus tells us through this story that heaven is an idea that is more than we can possibly imagine. It can give all the creatures of the world shelter and comfort especially to those who seek it. The main point is that Heaven is something that will grow and grow.

When you hear the word mustard, how many of you think of the yellow saucy stuff that goes well on a hotdog? You know-- ketchup's favorite playmate at a cookout. If you grind up mustard seed, mix it with vinegar and water you make the sauce we are talking about. Romans have been credited with being the first people to make mustard, but they were also well known for borrowing their ideas from other cultures. Anyhow, there is a good chance that Jesus ate mustard much like what we eat today. Although, I don't think he ate it on hotdogs.

So it's true, the mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds that there is. When it is planted in the ground, it grows up to be one of the largest plants, up to 12 feet tall! That's how deep the diving area was in the pool I swam in when I grew up. Even when I dove off the high board it wasn't easy to touch the bottom. The mustard plant looks more like a tree than a plant.

It's hard to imagine that a seed starting out very small could be so powerful. Within every seed is the ability to grow. Yet growth is something that is slow and steady. You cannot always see it happening before your eyes and if you looked at it every day, you might not see any change. However, if you planted the seed and you walked away and stay away, then after you returned in a year you would find a big change! That little seed would become an enormous plant. It could become a plant which bears fruit and provides a nice place to rest. That is one powerful seed.

There are two ways to look at this parable; there's the big picture and the more personal level. This parable explains the kingdom of heaven on a worldwide scale and in a more down to earth sort of way; this story explains the kingdom of heaven within each person of faith.

Jesus was speaking to Jewish folks when he was teaching his lesson, the ones known as God's chosen people. God promised to send a man to save these chosen people, but the people didn't understand what God meant by this promise. They had hoped God would send them a king to rescue them from the Roman Empire as Moses rescued them from Egypt, only they wanted this Savior to free them with military force. That's was not what happened. Christians believe that God sent this Savior to save them from their own wrong doing, their sin.

In this parable, Jesus was telling the listeners that their way was not God's way. God's way was meek and we see this by how God sent the Jewish Savior, Jesus, as a newborn baby. He grew up as a carpenter's son before embarking on his ministry. He spoke to small groups of people and in time more people came to listen to him. The small group of followers grew as they put their trust in him and his message. After his death, only a handful of his students were left to spread his stories of truth.

They were like a mustard seed, full of hidden power and the spirit of life. They taught people this story and soon this lesson was being shared with all of the world's creatures, not only the Jewish folks. All those who liked the story became known as members of the Kingdom of Heaven and it was bigger than any mustard plant.

In Colossians 1:6, we find what St. Paul wrote, *"All over the world the good news is bearing fruit and growing. It has been doing that among you since the day you heard it. That is when you understood God's grace in all its truth."*

You are like one of the small buds on a growing plant. You will mature into something grand. Whether this seed was planted on purpose or by accident by a bird flying over, when the seed finds good earth, it sprouts roots, and it grows and grows and grows. In you is a similar seed has taken root and it will also flourish. And like we sang earlier, roots will hold you close as wings will set you free.

Each person of faith is like the mustard seed in that parable. The Spirit of Life and Love grows in faithful people. When a person puts their trust in the truth of their faith, it grows larger inside them. Your spirit continues to grow throughout your entire life; it grows much longer and bigger than a body. This growth is so powerful that it can transform a person, just as the seed has the power to produce a 12 foot plant which produces good things. It makes branches that are good for the birds to rest and nest on, and it makes mustard seeds that are good to eat and their seed spreads making more plants.

All that is holy produces the good things that grow in your faith. The spiritual fruits are virtues of life. You also know these as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You may know these virtues as forgiveness, healing, righteousness, glory, grace, compassion, knowledge and truth. These are the most delicious fruits in the world and they are sure to sustain you even through the most difficult times. Your belief can change your attitudes and actions so that you are free from being ruled by your thoughts and feelings.

Spiritual Siblings, imagine this love, joy, peace, forgiveness, healing, righteousness, glory, grace, compassion inside of you! It comes from a small seed that grows in the sweet soil of your souls. It is through amazing grace that it grows slowly over time. Like the mustard seed, you are powerful. As Universalist Unitarians of Haverhill, you live your lives to ensure justice for all. And as you live these lives of yours, you focus on how to share this goodness far beyond yourselves so that all of the creatures of the world may enjoy it. Every time we gather in this holy place, we are energized by this grace. Can you feel it? Have you noticed how expansive it becomes when we are together? I have.

May it be so. Amen.