

I want to talk a bit this morning about an impulse I bet we've all had and we're not proud of. I call it a "must be nice" moment. This is a moment, a feeling we get when we meet someone who's in the same field or life-situation as us, but they're doing a little better than we are. Maybe they work for an organization that's more successful. Maybe they have a bigger salary. Or the so-called Mommy Wars, where talking about parenting has become cut-throat competition to see who can produce the best kids. It can happen just about anywhere, to anyone.

We see a peer who gets a big break, has some sort of obvious success, and we think, Must be nice.

Oh, he got that promotion? Must be nice.

Oh, you got recognized for that? Must be nice.

Oh, your kid made which team? Must be nice.

What we mean when we say (or, more likely, think), Must be nice, is that there's no good reason *their* good fortune shouldn't have been mine. We consider ourselves to be at least as good, capable or qualified as them. They just caught a break. Maybe they knew someone. Or just got lucky. Or something. We're not really sure what the fundamental difference between us and them is. So we shrug and think, Must be nice.

Religion is no different. We all know people that just seem to get the whole God thing better than we do. It seems like prayer comes naturally to them, that they can just understand the Bible. They just seem to be able to connect so easily with God.

And we think... man. Must be nice.

I wish my connection to God came that easily. I wish all those spiritual practices were so simple for me. I have to work, and I just don't feel it most of the time and... it must be nice.

If that's you, I've got some good news for you today: the difference between you and them isn't fundamental. You're not missing some vital component. God didn't leave something out when you were crafted. You're not dysfunctional.

The difference between living in God's Kingdom and just wishing you could is small everyday choices. That's because the Kingdom of God, this new life Jesus offers us, isn't built on big, flashy moments. It's built on small, steady, consistent choices to live like Jesus.

You might be thinking, No way. If you know any Bible stories, they're probably big, flashy moments: Noah's ark. The Red Sea. Jonah and the Whale. Jesus being raised from the dead. That's all pretty major. Must-be-nice moments (except for getting swallowed by a whale).

But while those moments are certainly in the Scriptures, believe it or not, they're not the norm. And according to Jesus himself, they're not the heart of the life he offers us.

This summer, we're exploring Jesus' Kingdom parables. Today, we're going to look at a parable in Matthew 13. Turn there in your bibles with me; if you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. Parables are short stories Jesus told to illustrate the quality and character of the

new life he brought to us. They're purposely ambiguous - Jesus told them to invite us to spend some time with them. The stories often work from cultural assumptions we don't understand because we're not first century Palestinians.

Let's take a look at today's parable, in Matthew 13:31-32: Jesus said,

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches. -- Matthew 13:31-32

Weird little story, isn't it? Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven, this new thing God is doing, this new life Jesus came to announce, is like a mustard seed. [pic] It starts out as the 'smallest of all seeds', but becomes a huge tree that gives shade to birds. [pic, maybe flowchart?]

That bit about the birds is a little strange. A mustard seed is basically a big weed – not the sort of place you expect birds to hang out. So Jesus' original listeners would've known right away he was referencing a passage in the Old Testament. Jesus chose that phrase to call to mind a promise God made to the prophet Ezekiel about 500 years before Jesus lived.

Speaking specifically of God's people, God told Ezekiel:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take a branch from the top of a tall cedar, and I will plant it on the top of Israel's highest mountain. It will become a majestic cedar, sending forth its branches and producing seed. Birds of every sort will nest in it, finding shelter in the shade of its branches. -- Ezekiel 17:22-23

Ezekiel used birds as a metaphor for the nations of the world (he's not the only prophet to do so). His vision here imagines a restoration movement God undertakes: one day, God's kingdom will become a huge, majestic tree that welcomes and shelters anyone and everyone in the whole world.

So Jesus' original listeners would've got that Jesus' parable was calling on Ezekiel's promise. But instead of a cedar tree, Jesus' kingdom is a mustard plant. That would've been shocking to his listeners. Cedar trees are huge, strong, beautiful trees. In Jesus' day, they were exceptionally valuable. Mustard plants, on the other hand were basically considered weeds. They grow easily and if not tended constantly and carefully overtake the gardens and fields they're found in. [side-by-side pic?]

Imagine today Ezekiel had said that God would roll onto the scene in a 2014 Mustang Cobra GT convertible. And then Jesus said, God's coming in a Pinto. [pics?] You'd say, Uh... Okay I get it... you're saying the kingdom of God's like a car... but... there's a world of difference between those two.

That's how the parable would've hit his original listeners. They'd have caught the reference to Ezekiel, but been surprised (maybe shocked?) by the difference in the plants.

God's people had always imagined themselves as a big cedar tree - the best of the best. When God came to restore the Kingdom, it would be a big flashy production. God was going to break into

their ordinary world and upend everything and BOOM - just like that, they would be instant winners. Heroes. Like winning the divine lottery. The whole world would look at them and say, wow. Must be nice.

So Jesus tells a story that says, You're missing the point of what God is doing. God's new thing isn't going to be a huge flashy show. It's going to be more... subtle. If the cedar thing is getting in your way, think of it more like a mustard plant. Those seeds are tiny. But the end result is not.

And that's the point. It's not about the end result. It's a slow, steady, constant process. And really, this is something they already should've known. Even a cedar tree doesn't grow overnight. You don't go to bed with an empty yard and then wake up the next morning with a giant cedar tree!

But somehow when we're walking among trees we tend to forget that. We focus on the end result, not the slow, steady process that got us there.

The Kingdom of God is a seed. It unfolds in small, unseen places every day. But from small, insignificant beginnings, it becomes an undeniable force. What matters, then, is not the big, flashy moments, but the small choices, the seed choices, we make for years leading up to those big, flashy moments.

The small choices you sow today determine what grows tomorrow. Just as Jesus described in the parable of the soils. Just like the tiny bit of yeast we looked at last week.

I want to introduce you to a friend of mine who's a wonderful example of this Mustard Seed kingdom. This is Lorie Moeggenberg. Lorie's a soon-to-be-published author whose first book, DOON comes out in September. **(let's do maybe a cover and author photo or something)** If you just met Lorie and learned she's an author with a pretty amazing book deal, you might think to yourself, Must be nice, especially if you have any publishing aspirations yourself.

But the reason I invited Lorie to share her story with us today is because Lorie shared on this stage about 14 months ago, before she had any publishing deals.

INTERVIEW

Lorie: take us back to that time. How long had you been writing at that point? **(tell me about your dream to write and how long you had been working on DOON)**

You and Tom made some real sacrifices and lifestyle changes so that you could pursue this dream. **(tell me about some of the choices you had to make)**

You got a pretty amazing book deal. From this vantage point, it could be easy for people to gloss over your success. Could you talk about the times you got discouraged during the writing process? **(what ever stories you want to share about wanting to quit or false starts or big disappointments)**

How has your journey to being published demonstrated God's faithfulness? **(i'm really interested here in hearing how far you've come, with the author events and hardcover books. It's a long way from a discouraged writer sitting at her desk wondering if she should throw in the towel!)**

We are surrounded by stories like Lorie's, of people in whom God is doing amazing things. We look at the giant mustard plant in their lives and say, Man! That must be nice! And we don't say it, but we secretly wonder, Where's mine?

According to Jesus, if we are only looking at the outcome, we're missing the point. The essence of the Kingdom of God isn't the highlights reel. It's not the big, flashy moments.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It's found in those small, barely-there moments each of us has a billion times a day. The tiny choices we rarely give thought to.

A marriage centered on Christ, a marriage that goes the distance isn't found in grand, romantic gestures or Hollywood-esque resolutions. Marriage in the Kingdom of God is found in choosing every day to put your spouse ahead of yourself, in choosing every day to be married no matter what you feel like. It's choosing to bite back that hurtful word, in assuming the best instead of the worst. It's choosing to be slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Friendships that are truly kingdom-building choose to be fully present instead of always distracted. It's leaving your phone on the charger (or in the car) when you sit down to a meal. It's choosing to ask the hard questions and not be afraid of being held accountable. Again, a kingdom friendship rushes to forgive rather than holding grudges.

And if you want a real relationship with God? It's not found in singular supernatural encounters. If you're sitting around waiting for God to drop into your living room and blow your mind, I've got bad news for you: God does that, but in my experience it's sort of like winning the lottery or alien abductions - it happens, but it's pretty rare. I wouldn't count on it. (Okay, maybe not the alien abductions.)

If you want a mind-blowing relationship with God, one where you're actually growing and being conformed into Jesus' image, finding real victory over sin in your life, and actually-transformed relationships, that's mustard-seed faith too. It's intentionally pursuing being formed by the Spirit. Making space in your life for reading Scripture, prayer, keeping a sabbath day, fasting and generosity. Every day, whether you feel like it or not.

Because you know that what you sow today determines what grows tomorrow. If you're not casting mustard-seed in your life, if you're not cultivating your soul to receive God in small, ordinary, every-day ways, you won't grow a mustard-tree kind of faith, the large, life-encompassing, transformative life with God.

Jesus tells us the Kingdom of God is like that mustard seed: if you make those small, everyday choices, if you're faithful in those small places, God's new life will overtake and consume the old. Life will overtake death. Love will overtake hate. Friendship will overtake enmity. Kindness will overtake spitefulness.

So what are you sowing today? In the small, daily choices you make, are you choosing to be like Jesus? A question we like to ask here is, What is the next right thing I should do?

What is the next right thing I should do at work? In my home? In my marriage? With my kids, my parents?

What's the next right thing I should do in my relationship with God?

It might seem like a small thing. But Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is found in the small things. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed. So choose to be faithful in small things, confident that God will produce miraculous, world-changing fruit from the seeds of your small choices.

Communion Set Up

We close our time together today by observing the Communion meal. It's appropriate because we look at the Cross, at Jesus' most sacrificial act and we think, I could never be that. I could never follow God that fully, that closely.

And yet we are to become the image of this Jesus. Not in big, flashy moments. But in small, every day choices. And Jesus calls us to remember that every time we eat, every time we drink.

By taking this bread, we remember that Jesus was broken for us. By dipping it in the juice, we remember that Jesus' blood was poured out for us.

Here at Beavercreek Nazarene, you don't have to be a member to take communion. This is Jesus' table, not ours. And he invites anyone who wants to walk into his kingdom. So if today you are committing to take that next right step, if you're willing to commit to find God's kingdom in the simple, every day choices, you're invited to the table.

Let's pray together.