

# LITTLE IS LARGE

## Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

*The Kingdom of heaven grows  
to become our greatest treasure.*

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On the western coast of Australia, there is a large inlet called Shark Bay, but its most famous resident is not a great white or any other variety of shark. It's a plant, the largest plant in the world. As long as anyone can remember, Shark Bay has been covered with a meadow of sea grass, a plant that grows in the salt water. The sea grass covers 77 square miles, equivalent in size to 20,000 football fields, three times the size of Manhattan Island. Several years ago, marine biologists took samples from various stalks of the sea grass. Through DNA testing, they hoped to find out how many sea grass plants were covering the bay. Jane Edgeloe, one of the scientists, reported, "The answer blew us away—there was just one! That's it, just one plant has expanded over 100 miles in Shark Bay, making it the largest known plant on Earth." In addition, they discovered that the plant could be over 4,000 years old. All that foliage from a single seed taking root in Shark Bay about the time of Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

If Jesus had only been to Australia, he might have said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like the sea grass in Shark Bay..."

Today we hear some pure parables from Jesus. These are not allegorized with explanations either from Jesus or Matthew, as we have seen the last two weeks. Parables are little stories or comparisons that make a single point and are not easily explainable. You have to think about them. Walter Wink, the great Bible scholar, says, "Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives."<sup>2</sup> Today we have four diamonds to look at and two simple ideas.

First is the mustard seed. 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.*"<sup>3</sup> Maybe there are some smaller seeds than the mustard plant, but not many. It's a tiny thing. And the mustard plants of the Middle East do grow into large woody shrubs reaching heights of 8 to 10 feet. Birds could easily nest in its branches.

The simple point of this parable is that the Kingdom of God can transform things from little to large. An insignificant thing can achieve great significance by the power of God.

If you think about it, Jesus himself was kind of a mustard seed. He came from a small village, a son of the working class. He never acquired wealth, never held a political office, never wrote a book. He never traveled the world. He was so unpopular with the people in power that they killed him. Yet from an insignificant background came a world religion that today is the largest faith on the planet. More books have been written about him, more nations influenced, more people transformed than by any other human in history. A real mustard seed.

The church is also a mustard seed. It was started by 11 discouraged disciples and a few women. Yet by the power of the Holy Spirit, this movement spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. In less than three centuries, Christianity was the official religion of the formerly pagan Roman Empire. No institution of society has had more impact—and continues across the globe today—than the Church of Jesus Christ. A mustard seed church.

Most of us are walking, talking mustard seeds. We are like Paul described the Christians in Corinth: *“Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”*<sup>4</sup> But look at what we have become—doctors, lawyers, preachers, missionaries, Sunday School teachers, choir members, moms, and dads—many things that have an impact on people and our community, many things that point to the Kingdom of God in our midst.

The second diamond is a fungus. Yeast is a type of fungus that has one particular talent; it can transform water and carbohydrates to alcohol and carbon dioxide. The Egyptians discovered how to make beer and bread using yeast about 4,000 years ago. (Let’s hear it for the Egyptians!) Yeast works like a mustard seed: the more alcohol and carbon dioxide it produces, the more it grows, and the more it grows, the more it produces.

Yeast is referred to many times in Scripture, and frankly, most of the time it is negative (*“Beware the yeast of the Pharisees!”*<sup>5</sup>). But here Jesus uses yeast in a positive sense, as something that is pervasive and persistent, transforming a high volume of flour into good bread dough. He said, *“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.”*<sup>6</sup>

This is how faith works. The idea is transformation. Like a mustard plant transforms from a tiny seed to a big bush, like a little yeast can transform flour into bread dough, faith can transform the little to large, the small to great, the insignificant to important.

Transformation often happens when you get a bunch of kids together for Vacation Bible School. This summer in Navarre, Florida, on the last day of VBS, one of the kids, an elementary student named Olivia, came up to the pastor, Rev. David Morris. She told him she wanted to become a Christian. But not only did she want to follow Jesus, she also wanted to be baptized. Of course, the pastor agreed to sit down and talk with Olivia and her parents and make it happen. Since Navarre is on the Gulf Coast, he asked Olivia if she wanted to be baptized at the church or at the beach. Like any kid would, Olivia picked the ocean. Wouldn’t you? So they announced the upcoming baptism, and Olivia’s brother also said he wanted to be baptized. Then the pastor’s phone started ringing and several other VBS students wanted to get baptized. Then some of their parents wanted to join in. So on the day of Olivia’s baptism, they baptized twelve people, reaffirmed one baptism,

and had five adults join the church by profession of faith. David Morris, the pastor, wrote, “The faithfulness and decision for Christ one child made changed the lives of seventeen others forever. Her decision gave others the encouragement they needed to say yes to a life of faithfulness to Jesus. ... The kingdom of God is made greater by those who make the decision for Christ. I am so proud of Olivia and cannot wait to see how she continues to impact the life of our church as she grows as a disciple of Jesus Christ and transforms the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Like our other parables of the Kingdom, the second act moves Jesus from speaking to the crowds by the seashore to a private conversation with the disciples. Jesus also changes ideas, from transformation to treasure. Who doesn’t love a treasure hunt? From the time we read the stories of pirates in our youth—Long John Silver, Blackbeard, and so forth—to the exploits of Captain Jack Sparrow and Indiana Jones, seeking and finding treasure captures our imagination. Which is exactly what Jesus was trying to do. Often we conceive of treasure as material things—gold doubloons, diamonds, rubies, pearls, and the like. But we can also conceive of the treasures of the heart—our relationships, our families, which are worth more than any material wealth in the world. But Jesus wants to challenge us to go even further and think about the spiritual treasure that will last forever, the treasure of the kingdom of heaven.

There are two ways to find this treasure. You might find it by surprise. Like the man who accidentally dug up treasure in his field. This really could have happened in a field in Galilee in the first century. They had been overrun so many times by invading armies that there was no telling what might be buried from what empire in any random field. This lucky fellow dug up something very valuable. Immediately, he covered up the treasure and went and sold everything he had to buy that piece of property.

Now you might question, “Didn’t that treasure belong to the original owner of the property? Was Jesus advocating dishonesty or unethical conduct?” No, precisely because this kind of thing happened, the rabbis had made a rule. In the rabbinic law, it is complicated, but it basically means “Finders keepers” on any buried treasure.<sup>8</sup>

The other way to find the treasure of the Kingdom is to search for it, like the dealer in precious stones who found the pearl. Pearls were highly valued way back then. There were no cultured pearls, and some of the pearls came from as far away as the oceans around Britain. One day this merchant saw the kind of pearl he had been looking for all his life, and like the guy with the field, he sold everything to get this one thing.

Whether it comes to you as a surprise, a revelation, an experience of enlightenment, or whether it is the culmination of a disciplined process of discovery, the Kingdom of God is worth whatever it takes to possess. Because when you experience the Kingdom of God, everything else falls into place, and you know your goal—your victory in life—is going to happen. It’s achievable. It’s assured.

Kyle McDonald’s treasure was to own a home. But he was stuck in a dead-end job and strapped for money. He came up with an improbable plan: starting with one red paperclip, he would trade on the Internet until he exchanged it for a house.

First, he traded the red paperclip for a fish-shaped pen. Next, he traded the pen for a doorknob. He traded the doorknob for a Coleman stove. He traded the Coleman stove for an electric generator. He traded the electric generator for a Budweiser sign and a keg of beer, which he then traded for a snowmobile. Exactly one year and 14 trades later, McDonald finally reached his goal: he exchanged a part in a Hollywood movie for a home

in Saskatchewan, Canada. He wrote about the experience in his book, *One Red Paperclip*, which was made into a movie. Fame, fortune, a book, a movie deal, and a home—it all began with one red paperclip.<sup>9</sup>

That's a mustard seed/yeast/treasure in the field/pearl of great price story if I've ever heard one.

Today I want to invite you to take your assets and transform them into treasure. Though it may not seem like much, invest what you have in the Kingdom of God, because in the Kingdom of God, little becomes large, small becomes great, insignificant becomes important.

Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran minister and writer, saw the Kingdom in two very similar incidents in two self-service gas stations, the old-timey kind that didn't have a convenience store attached. One cold and rainy night, Wangerin was filling up his car, when suddenly the young man watching the station stood beside him. He smiled and said, "Hello." He looked directly into Wangerin's eyes as he spoke, and you could just tell he cared about what was going on at the gas station. When Wangerin paid for his gas, the young man did a very simple but extraordinary thing. He shook Walter's hand and said, "Thank you." No big deal. A forgettable incident. Except as Wangerin got back in his car his wife said, "Why are you smiling?" Walter had experienced a little bit of Kingdom between him and a stranger.

A few days later—a bright, sunshiny day—Wangerin filled up at a different station and went in to pay for his gas. The woman attendant just sat there, staring down at the empty desk. Finally she snapped, "Whaddaya want?"

Wangerin said, "I'd like to pay for my gas."

"How much?" she asked.

"Seventeen..." his voice trailed off.

The woman snatched the money and stuffed it in the register. There were angry creases all over her face. She cracked her gum like a bullwhip and whirled her hair around a finger. Wangerin stood there a moment too long, and the woman looked right through him and growled, "You stuck? What're you waitin' on?" As he slid back into his car, Wangerin felt heavy. The woman's sadness made him sad.

Thinking about these two incidents, Wangerin wrote:

Every time you meet another human being you have the opportunity. It's a chance at holiness. For you will do one of two things, then. Either you will acknowledge that he is, or you will make him sorry that he is—sorry, at least, that he is in front of you. You will create, or you will destroy. And the things you dignify or deny are God's own property. They are made, each one of them, in [God's] own image.

There are no useless minor meetings. There are no dead-end jobs. There are no pointless lives. Swallow your sorrows, forget your grievances and all the hurt your poor life has sustained. Turn your face truly to the human before you and let her, for one pure moment, shine. Think her important, and then she will suspect that she is fashioned of God.<sup>10</sup>

Every moment is a mustard seed. It doesn't have to be large; God makes it so. Every moment you have the power to be the leaven in the world, to permeate creation with the aroma of Christ, to transform yourself and others with the help of God. Every person is a treasure. Every day, you might find the pearl. Life is a treasure hunt, not for material

success, not even for emotional satisfaction, but a search to see God at work in the world. That is the Kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Corbley, “This Plant From a Single Seed is Now 77 Sq-Miles Wide and World’s Largest,” *Good News Network*, June 22, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Wink, *The Christian Century* (Nov. 5, 1980). Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:31f.

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 1:26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:6.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:33.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.awfumc.org/newsdetail/childs-baptism-request-multiplies-to-make-more-disciples-17504133>.

<sup>8</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 85.

<sup>9</sup> The Chronicle: Lebanon Presbyterian Church (November 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Walter Wangerin, “Edification/Demolition,” in *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 129f.