

Growing

Across the Street, Around the World Series, November 18 & 19 | Matthew 13:31-33

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Some things start small.

A human life starts very small.

At the start, a new human life is tiny. Things are happening rapidly, but the baby is just a fraction of a millimeter in diameter. Tiny.

Even when a human baby is ten weeks old, things are happening quickly. More than 90% of the body's organs have formed. The baby's brain is working. The baby feels things. But the baby is still less than an inch and a half long!

Even when we are born, we usually weigh less than ten pounds, and there is next to nothing we can do for ourselves. Human life starts very small.

Even after birth, human beings struggle for a long time to become self-sufficient.

It takes months to get ready to smile, eat solid food, and walk.

It takes years to learn how to talk, read, and do complicated things.

Our brains are forming, and we are learning how to think.

As we grow and mature, we are vulnerable.

However, most of the time, everything comes together in a strong, healthy, adult human being.

Most adults are capable of reasoning, providing for, and caring for themselves.

But it takes two decades (or more) to become mature adults.

Knowing that we start small helps us to understand what Jesus says in Matthew 13:31-33:

He put another parable before them, saying, "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."

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

These are the Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven.

In them, Jesus is saying something about the Kingdom of God.

He wants us to understand something that comes naturally to us. Smallness.

The Kingdom of God starts small.

The Kingdom of God started small and stayed small for a long time.

When the Kingdom of God came near in Jesus, he was conceived by a single mom.

He was born as a vulnerable baby to peasant parents.

Jesus started his ministry in the hills of Galilee, surrounded by an odd assortment of nobodies. Even when he drew crowds, he never had an army. Jesus ended up arrested and crucified by the authorities. Even when he rose from the dead, he had only 500 followers.

Everyone watching was asking, "Is this all there is?"

You have to understand what people expected the Kingdom of God to look like.

People expected that when Messiah came, the centuries of suffering that the Jewish people had been through would be over. Messiah would break the power of the empires that had run over Israel and Judah for hundreds of years.

People expected that Messiah would then start a kingdom that itself would prosper and be secure with God's blessing. That kingdom would become an empire that would actually dominate other nations and at the same time bring them to God.

People expected that when the Kingdom of God came, the Jewish people would finally have a king, one like the great King David, who had ruled Israel back in the glory days.

Jesus seemed to be none of that. That's why people were asking questions.

Even John the Baptist asked of Jesus, "Are you really the one we were expecting?"

John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus; their births were connected and both covered with the appearance of angels and promises from God. John knew all of that about Jesus.

John intentionally prepared the way for the Messiah, calling people to repentance.

John pointed directly to Jesus and said about him, "Here is the Lamb of God. This is the guy!"

Then John was arrested and thrown into prison.

While he was sitting in prison, he kept hearing about what Jesus was doing.

It wasn't what John expected. John had questions.

In **Matthew 11:3** John sent messengers to Jesus to ask,

... "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Even John the Baptist had questions because the Kingdom of God was starting in such a surprisingly small kind of way.

Jesus explained that the Kingdom of God is like a proverbially small seed.

When Jesus speaks about a mustard seed, it is indeed small.

It's less than a tenth of an inch in diameter.

It's possibly not the smallest seed that exists.

However, it's proverbially small, meaning that it was a saying across many cultures, something like, "as small as a mustard seed."

Jesus also explained that the Kingdom of God is also like leaven.

Again, leaven is small. It's not as simple as saying that the Kingdom of God is the size of yeast.

In the ancient world, leavening was done differently. Dough would be fermented.

Then a small amount of fermented dough would be added to a fresh supply of flour and water to create a bigger lump of dough.

A small amount of fermented dough would be kept to continue the process.

It's like the process people use now to create sourdough starter and make sourdough bread.

But again, the Kingdom of God starts as something small and vulnerable, cooking away in a cabinet somewhere until it is ready to go.

Jesus explained that the Kingdom of God is like that.

Jesus was announcing that the Kingdom of God had dawned and that it had come near in him.

But it wasn't anything like what people expected or hoped.

Consequently, Jesus had been peppered with questions and doubts.

Jesus acknowledged that the Kingdom of God wasn't what they expected.

However, Jesus said clearly that it was indeed the Kingdom of God.

But, he clarified, the Kingdom of God starts small. Like a mustard seed. Like leaven.

The Kingdom of God can still feel small.

We watch world events swirl in dangerous directions.

There is a war raging in the Ukraine, pitting East against West.

There is trouble brewing between China and the West.

There is a war going on between Israel and Hamas. It threatens to engulf the Middle East.

All the while, the United States seems unprepared and deeply divided.

That all feels dangerous.

We see society in the West moving away from God.

Western societies like the United States and Europe seem to become increasingly secular.

We treat truth like a subjective item that's up to the individual to determine.

Consequently, our morality becomes less and less Christian and more and more pagan.

Marriages and families are under immense pressure.

There is even deep confusion and pain about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Depression, anxiety, addictions, and violence are rampant.

Western beliefs and behaviors are consistently at odds with God's plan for human flourishing.

We feel personally isolated and vulnerable at times.

When you go to work or school, you may find yourself alone as a person of faith.

You may find yourself surrounded by people who believe and behave differently from you.

Not only do they believe and behave differently from you, but they think you are wrong.

At times, you may be told that things you think and do are dangerous.

You may come under intense pressure to remain silent about what you think and do.

You may experience pressure to go along with things you disagree with.

My own wife has, at times, felt isolated and vulnerable in public as a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Before we moved to Connecticut, she was a public-school teacher.

One fall she came back to a new principal with a new seminar on handling stress and focusing. She researched what was being presented and realized that it was Buddhism.

She went to her new principal. She didn't know him. He didn't know her.

She asked to be excused from the seminar because it violated her religious beliefs and taught and supported a religion that was not hers. She offered to do an independent study instead.

That was a tense time for us because she wasn't going to attend, regardless of his response. Her income was important to our family's budget, and we depended on her for access to health insurance.

Thankfully, the school reluctantly allowed her not to attend. However, she was told to keep quiet about her objections.

We understand what it's like to feel alone with our faith in the public realm.

Sometimes the Kingdom of God can still feel very small indeed.

As a disciples of Jesus and citizens of the Kingdom of God, we can feel alone.

When we feel alone, we can feel vulnerable and isolated.

It can make us wonder if the Kingdom of God is really powerful and if it will really win.

Or is the Kingdom of God somehow losing in the world right now?

And will the Kingdom of God lose in the end?

Jesus was addressing this question. He was saying, "Yes, the Kingdom of God starts small. At times, it can feel small."

However, smallness is not the end of the story on the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God inevitably becomes big.

God's Kingdom has King Jesus.

Many of us probably have pictures of Jesus in our minds. It may be of Jesus the Good Shepherd. It may be of Jesus standing at the door knocking. It may be of Jesus on the cross.

However, that's not the only picture of Jesus in the Bible.

A friend recently reminded me what an amazing picture we find of Jesus in Revelation 1.

There we find King Jesus. In Revelation chapter one, Jesus is radiant with glory and surrounded by signs of rule. His eyes shine with flame, his feet are like heated metal, and his voice is like the sound of rushing water. His face blazes like the noon sun.

When John saw that vision of Jesus, he fell down in worship. In **Revelation 1:17** John writes,

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. ...

That's Jesus who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. God's Kingdom has Jesus.

God's Kingdom will grow.

In Revelation 5, the representatives of the Church fell down before Jesus to praise him. Look at what they say about him in **Revelation 5:9-10**:

... "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Jesus had done it! He has redeemed a vast multitude of people!

Just how big is that multitude?

Today alone, more than a billion people proclaim Christ as Lord.

Growth is inevitable.

The tiny mustard seed certainly becomes a plant that's so large that it feels like a tree. Mustard plants grow to become six to twelve feet tall.

And when Jesus speaks about leavening three measures of flour, he is talking about roughly 40-60 pounds of flour. It's enough to feed 100-150 people. It's a massive amount of dough.

The Kingdom of God may start small, but it becomes truly huge!

What a reassuring thought in a crazy world!

When the world seems to be spinning into chaos, we know that God is powerful and in charge.

When we are tempted to worry about the world or even about our society, we are reminded that we are in the care and power of God, who is much bigger and much more powerful than we are. He has a plan for today and a plan for eternity. We don't need to worry.

What a comforting thought when you feel isolated!

We may feel vulnerable, but we are on the winning side of history.

In the end, we will stand with multitudes from every nation, tribe, and ethno-linguistic people group before the throne of God. We may feel alone from time to time now, but we will be together forever.

The Kingdom of God grows now when we go across the street.

The growing Kingdom of God calls for us to go across the street.

The Kingdom of God starts small, but it becomes big. Massive even.

God starts it, grows it, secures it along the way, and makes it big and consequential in the end.

Our effort is not the point; God's promise is the point.

Our effort is not the point, but our effort is not beside the point.

If the Kingdom of God is growing from small to large, that has to figure into our theology.

That theology should drive us to action. It should drive us to mission.

That theology should drive us across the street to the people where we live, work, and play.

We are surrounded by people who do not yet know Jesus.

That means that right now, they are not heading toward eternity in heaven.

Instead, they are heading toward eternity in conscious punishment in hell.

That's not what we want! We want them to be part of the Kingdom of God through Jesus!

These are our neighbors. They are our family members and friends. They are our co-workers. If they are going to meet Jesus, God is going to send us across the street!

The BLESS lifestyle describes how we go across the street.

BLESS is an acronym that stands for five critical practices for us as disciples of Jesus.

B stands for “**B**egin with Prayer.” We pray for the lost people where we live, work, and play.

L stands for “**L**isten with Care.” We pay attention to them and listen to what’s on their minds.

E reminds us to “**E**at Together.” That’s pretty easy, but it means we extend hospitality to people and spend time with them.

The first S stands for “**S**erve with Love.” That means we do things for them that show God’s love. Doing so opens doors and leads to the final “s.”

The second S stands for “**S**hare Your Story.” It means that we share what God has done in our lives and invite them to follow Jesus, too.

Fostering Hope has proven that going across the street changes lives and can change the world.

Fostering Hope is an agency we have been working with to start a ministry to care for children and families impacted by foster care.

We are working to build this ministry because making sure that every child has a home is so close to the heart of God. The Bible tells us to care for the orphans. The Bible also tells us that, at one time, we were not God’s sons and not God’s daughters. But through Christ, we have been adopted into God’s family as his sons and daughters.

There is a church plant in the Greater Boston area that has started such a foster-care ministry.

When they started, frankly, the government agencies involved were not too interested in working with them. Sometimes we Christians are not welcome in public.

But these Christians went “across the street” and served the foster-care system, foster children, and foster parents. Now, the government agency welcomes people from the church to sit with them weekly at their strategy meetings. They are strategic partners.

Parents, kids, and government workers are all seeing the love of God and hearing the Good News, because people from that church went across the street.

I’ve got plans to make with some people.

There are some people across the street from me, figuratively speaking.

I’ve got to go across the street of my life to them.

I’ve got to make room in my life for them. I’ve got to serve them and show them the love of God. I’ve got to share with them the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Then, I pray they will become part of God’s Kingdom.

And that Kingdom that started small will continue to grow.

Will you join me?