

Educators are always testing and measuring; a few years ago they told students a riddle as a measure of their ability to think. “Only 17% of Stanford University graduates figured out this riddle, but 80% of kindergarteners knew the answer.” Here is the riddle:

“What is stronger than God,  
more evil than the devil,  
poor people have it,  
rich people don’t need it,  
and if you eat it, you’ll die?”

Literally, the word parable means “a riddle.” They are stories that leave the listener with the responsibility of figuring out just what they mean. Jesus told more than 40 parables during his ministry, and he only explained one of them to his disciples, so that left us disciples with a lot of figuring out to do.

The first things we should notice is that the details in the parable of the mustard seed are skewed. We might not notice, not being Palestinian farmers, but those who heard Jesus tell this parable sure did. Mustard seeds are not the smallest seeds. They are tiny, but they are definitely not the smallest. And they do not grow to become the largest of all garden plants. They end up a shrub maybe 4 foot tall. In fact, for them Mustard isn’t a garden plant at all: it’s a weed. And it was against Jewish law to plant weeds in a garden.

Those who heard Jesus tell this parable knew something was up! He knew what mustard was. He knew and they knew. Was he really saying that the Kingdom might be small but unstoppable like weeds in the garden?

He was definitely talking about the power of small things to turn into something great.

A small fellow, not much over 5 feet tall, applied for a job as a lumberjack in Alaska. The foreman, thinking to discourage him, gave him a large ax, set him before a tree hundreds of feet tall, and yards in diameter, and told him to chop it down. Within minutes the tree had been felled. The amazed foreman asked him where he'd learned to chop trees so powerfully. The little fellow replied, "When I worked in the Sahara forest." "You mean the Sahara **desert**." "That was after I got there," said the small lumberjack.

The big project, the mega church, the program that gets all the publicity may not be as important as people tend to think. A Texan was visiting a friend who was a small Ohio farmer. "Is this all the land you have?" he asked. "Where I come from, I can get in my car at 6:00 a.m. and drive all day and never see the end of my land." "Is that right?" said the farmer. "I used to have a car like that too."

It's small things that we focus on today. Following the lord, keeping his commandments isn't a big dramatic thing. It's mostly about small choices made on small days, over and over and over again. Small things such as remembering God made us, so we don't make God. Such as remembering that we had better not put God's name on anything in a vain show of power. Such as remembering that if God made the universe and rested, then we need to let go of our tiny universes and rest too. Little things, like remembering not just to honor your parents when they are old and gray, but also to train your children to honor you.

And don't let them get away with small, crummy, petty things. And don't lie in small things. Then the great truths within you have a shot. And don't strike up teasing, betraying relationships. Almost every adulterous relationship begins with small, careless choices. And don't make choices that whittle away at your life or anyone else's. Respect others and their property. If we don't steal in small ways, we won't get all messed up in big ways. And then don't covet. Don't waste your life wanting another life. All small things that make a great difference.

We follow the God who showed up two thousand years ago in small ways on days of small things. A healing touch here. A compassionate word there. Small things like not giving up on flawed friends. Like praying everyday. Small things like enjoying life. Jesus really enjoyed life. Small things like speaking truth to those in power. Like giving his small, mustard-seed-sized life so that the new universe of resurrected, reborn life could be created.

A teacher asked a class of third graders, "How many great people were born in our city?" "None," replied a pupil. "There were no great people born. They were born babies who became great people."

Here in the Midwest, folk plant more corn than mustard seed. One variety of corn, I'm told, is called Golden Bantam. Apparently, all the Golden Bantam corn in this country came from one stalk discovered on a Vermont hillside. How it got there is anybody's guess. But appreciating its special qualities, the person who discovered it carefully preserved its seed and planted it year after year. Now it is available to the whole world.

That's how the kingdom of God works. A small act, simple start act – a great result.

Someone has noted that masterpieces come from the smallest beginnings. From eight notes come every hymn, song, and symphony ever composed. All literature is born from the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. From them came the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address.

There will always be a small number of people who who will get recognized for doing great things but don't be surprised if the seeds you plant look ineffective. Don't be surprised if the witness you have to offer seems so puny. It's the old "Jack and the Beanstalk" fable: Jack's mother scorns the tiny beans he brings home from the market. They can never live off those! So in anger she hurls them out the window. Those beans were a non-starter, a mistake, a dead-end nutritionally and in every other sense. Except that, of course, they ended up sprouting into a beanstalk that went, in a way, clear up to heaven.

Our call as christians is to plant the small seeds everyday; God will turn them into something great.

Oh, if you ddon't have access to a kindergarten kid I'll bet you would like to know the answer to that riddle:

“What is stronger than God,  
more evil than the devil,  
poor people have it,  
rich people don't need it,  
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Like every kindegarten kid knows: the answer is Nothing.