

Copyright November 16 & 17, 2019. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

**Title:** More or Less: Making Enough More

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Ezekiel 17:22-24](#)

**Text:** [Mark 4:26-34](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



My family encouraged aliens. I know that sounds bad, giving the current political discussion but it is honest. It is my grandmother's fault although she would blame her father. He was a coal miner from Missouri and an early settler in the Oklahoma Territory. When he moved from Missouri with my great grandmother, he took seeds and

sprigs of their Missouri farm. His favorite was an alien shrub, the Asian honeysuckle. He propagated it on their little homestead in Coweta, OK.

He could grow just about anything in his ten-acre garden. He shared the talent with my grandmother who was equally capable. She always lived with us and we always had the alien honeysuckle in our yards. I didn't know it at the time, but she had taken from her father's homestead for our backyard in Tulsa. It was an amazing bush, a hummingbird magnet. But my father was constantly cutting it back, fighting with it because it would grow like a weed.

When we moved from Tulsa to Dallas, the alien species went with us, just a little seedling. Again, she propagated it easily in the back yard and again, it wanted to take over. It spread so fast that our next-door neighbor complained that our bush was invading their yard.

Nearly 35 years ago, when we moved to Indiana to begin our church, we bought a house just around the corner in Beam Reach. When my parents and grandmother came up to see it, she brought the alien and planted it just outside the kitchen window, saying, "It grows fast; you'll have a big shrub in no time." After they left, I dug it up. By then, I knew it was an alien and on the Indiana invasive species hit list for eradication.

Whenever I read Mark's Gospel and Jesus' description that the kingdom of God is a mustard seed that becomes a great shrub, I think of that honeysuckle. There is a reason. The mustard bush, like Asian Honeysuckle, is also an invasive plant. In *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder, a Roman author and naturalist who wrote shortly after the life of Jesus, describes the mustard bush as known through-out Palestine as having the tiniest seed.

Jesus was using a well-known example. Then, Pliny goes on to say, "With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild... but when it is sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.<sup>1</sup> It more or less takes over the place, so much so that by the second century, the Mishna forbid it being planted in a small garden. Call it mint on steroids, Asian honeysuckle, an invasive shrub that acts like kudzu.

We are talking about stewardship, about more and less and today about how enough can become more. There is perhaps no better parable to point to than the little mustard seed who could. Anybody here like that story? Not the little mustard seed that could but the little engine who could. Did you know it was written by a Methodist pastor? Maybe he got it from this parable. Or maybe he simply wrote it because it is the type of story we like. We like the victory of the little guy, the small overcoming the large, the underdog winning. It's biblical.

Moses versus Pharaoh, David vs. Goliath, or the wee little man Zacchaeus overcoming public opinion. We love movies like *Rudy* and *Hoosiers*, stories that celebrate the little, overcoming the giant obstacles. And so naturally, this is the lens through which we most often look at the parable of the mustard seed. From the tiny, comes the magnificent. Is this what Jesus is saying, more or less? Just a little is enough to become more?

Perhaps, but let's step back and look at the context of this little parable. It comes in the fourth chapter of Mark where there are a series of agricultural parables. Jesus offers these parables while in a boat just off the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He starts off telling the Parable of the Sower. It is a parable that you live with, each time you come to worship in this place. The window wall in this sanctuary is based on that parable. The Parable of the Sower is different from the two which I just read because it begins: "A sower went out to sow..." (Mark 4:3) Sowing is planting. There is nothing extravagant about it. There is intentionally.

During Jesus' time, good farmland was hard to find. Much of it was rocky, or weedy. And if a farmer had access to good soil, they would sow their crops carefully, planting only where they were confident the seed would grow, seeking the maximum harvest. They would never just scatter seeds because they didn't want to waste them. Jesus explains the first parable and then, turns to the two more, short parables ending with the mustard seed.

But not before giving a clear challenge. Jesus says, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you." (Mark 4:24)

Then, Jesus begins telling two parables, which he says described the Kingdom of God. This is unique and special. Other parables may describe our relationship with God or each other. But these two Jesus specifically describe the kingdom of God.

The first starts very differently. Jesus says: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground..." (Mark 4:26) This isn't sowing; it is spreading seed wherever, without intention, without a plan, perhaps even extravagantly. Time passes and somehow, someday, the seeds sprout and grow. The farmer doesn't know how. But Jesus seems to suggest that the farmer trusts and expects a harvest.

Then, without a pause, Jesus tells the parable about the invasive mustard seed. If Pliny is right, everyone knows its reputation. Everyone listening probably nodded maybe even chuckled. Everyone knew that tiny seed becomes a four-foot shrub, almost overnight. Everyone knew that it could be a problem plant, take over the place.

But no one knew it to be quite the way Jesus described it, as "...the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4:32) Except it didn't and they can't. Jesus is cleaning up his illustration with another reference that his audience would understand. His Jewish listeners would remember the kingdom promise from Ezekiel about the cedars of Lebanon. God will take a shoot from a cedar and "...will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches." (Ezekiel 19:22) That would be a sign that God has restored the kingdom. The mustard shrub will be the same. It's like the cedars of Lebanon now, it's a kingdom tree, a sign of the way things will be. This is the way the kingdom of God will grow.

So we have two parables, one about a farmer who scatters the seed and waits and the other, about that tiny mustard seed, that grows rapidly into an invasive shrub. Just what is Jesus trying to tell us about the kingdom of God? What are we to more or less understand?

The first is the partnership that brings the kingdom. We have a responsibility to invest, to scatter seeds and then, let God be God. Too often we think that our gifts are making things happen. We want to fund a mission trip or write a check for the Christmas program.

It's a transaction understanding of giving like we do every day. We are purchasing something. But the seed money invested in the kingdom is different. It doesn't just fund a trip or pay for a concert. It grows into

something larger, transforming lives and becoming a sign of the kingdom. Like the farmer, who is mystified by the growth that occurs, we too experience the mystery of enough becoming more. We might scatter the seed, but the power for germination, the energy for growth within our gifts unfolds according to God's plan for the kingdom. God transforms our gifts and blesses them, turning them into signs of the kingdom. This is important. There is no gift, no investment, no financial transaction or purchase that you make that has the potential for greater return. Why? Because we trust that God can take enough and make it something more.

It is why Jesus followed up the parable of scattering seeds with the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus wasn't using the mustard seed as an example of a little can go a long way. Mark doesn't say faith the size of a mustard seed moves mountains. That's Matthew. It doesn't grow into a mighty tree as Luke offers. It's an invasive shrub that grows horizontally more than vertically, taking over gardens and fields. Just a little seed is enough to become more, and this is the design of the kingdom. It's wired to grow...to spread...to be shared. If Jesus was teaching today, he might even use the word viral. Mustard seed investments in the kingdom spread and go viral because when enough is offered, more is discovered.

One of the most powerful examples of this in recent times is the seed sown by a young man named Alex Sheen. In 2011, Alex was a successful IT engineer, rising rapidly in his company when his father developed lung cancer. His fight with cancer started well but he would eventually die and on September 4, 2012, Alex was asked to give his eulogy. He thought a lot about his father. He was an average man. He didn't run marathons but he did write books and was a war hero. An everyday person, almost unnoticeable except for one thing. He was a man of his word. He was always there when Alex needed him. He always followed through with what he said. And so, Alex decided to title his eulogy, "Because I said I would." He told those who were gathered that he didn't want to remember his father the way he died. He wanted to remember him the way he lived and the way he lived was to keep his promise.

So, for the first time at the memorial service, Alex passed out, to those in attendance, calling cards. They were blank except down in the bottom corner was simply, "Because I said I would." And he encouraged everyone as a way to honor his father, write down a promise and give the card to someone else. Surprisingly for a computer nerd, he somehow knew how to speak publicly. It was a powerful way to eulogize his father.

That night, he took the leftover cards home and decided to make a Facebook page titled "Because I said I would." It was, he thought, just a way to

remember his father. And there in the privacy of his grief, he decided to offer 10 cards mailed free of charge anywhere in the world. When he finally hit send that night, he expected that he'd have maybe 10 or 15 requests. The next morning when awoke, there wasn't 10, or 15 or even 100. There were over 1000 requests. The next day, another 1,500 and it kept growing and has ever since.

Since that night on September 4, 2012, "because I said I would" has grown into an international non-profit and has sent over 11.3 million Promise Cards to more than 150 countries. His mustard seed moment lead to a humanitarian movement encouraging a world to live with character and keep promises. It was just enough to become more. <sup>2</sup>

We have that opportunity, maybe not to go viral but to grow the kingdom, to spread the gospel, to share the love of God in Christ Jesus. That's what we are doing with our offerings, with our gifts, with our pledge cards where we promise to give because we said we would. It's important work because God has a vision, a dream about a kingdom on earth. God sent Jesus to teach us about it.

Jesus said the kingdom of God comes when we scatter seed and trust God to make it something bigger, greater, something that spreads like an invasive, alien shrub. And if we respond with enough, there will be more, much more than we can even imagine. It can take over the place which is of course, exactly what God wants to do.

Be a part of this. Give enough that we can do more because this is more or less the way the kingdom grows.

---

<sup>1</sup> (Pliny, "Natural History" 19.170-171; Rackham et al. 5.528-529)

<sup>2</sup> <https://becauseisaidiwould.org/>