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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

The Kingdom of God Starts Small, But Becomes Great
Part of June Sermon Series: "The Reign of God Arrives in Christ"
Mark 4:26-34
INI

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,
²⁷ and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself
does not know how. ²⁸ For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that
the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because
the harvest has come."

³⁰ Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall
we picture it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than
all the seeds on earth; ³² but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and
shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it.
³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all
things to His disciples.

In Jesus name,

What I have in my hand is big. Well, at least in terms of its potential in the hands
of God. Sure it doesn't look like much. Just a speck. Drop it and you would easily lose
it. Yet, dropping it is the only way to see how big it really is.

I looked through my seeds for the season and the closest I could come to a
mustard seed is what I have here in my hand: a mammoth sunflower seed. A mustard
seed would be even smaller. 1-2 millimeters. But just drop it and you'll see how big it
really is. A full grown mustard plant can reach up to 6 and 1/2 feet tall.

But we must drop it. Let go of it. There is nothing more to do, but place it into
the hands of God, into the soil that He has promised to bless. And there we leave it. We
can't even see it any more. It is lost in the dirt. But there we have his promise. There

we have his hands, reaching into the soil, holding it, blessing it, cultivating it, and there what once was so small, becomes something great.

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We continue our series in Mark, considering the contrasts of the kingdom. Today's contrast Jesus presents in a parable: something little vs. something big. Today Jesus shows us in a parable that something which seems so small, insignificant, even impossible and not worth even noting to so many, turns out to be the greatest thing of all. God drops it into our midst and there we have his promise. The Kingdom of God Starts Small, But Becomes Great

We'll look at three examples of God accomplishing great things from small beginnings. We'll consider Israel which was brought low, but which becomes the soil for God to sprouts something new in Christ. We'll consider The CLC is sown as something which seems small and insignificant, but which is sheltered by the eternally great grace of God. And finally we'll consider our congregation here at Ascension, which, although small and weak in numbers, becomes something great and mighty in the hands of God.

1. Israel is brought low, but becomes the soil for God to sprouts something new in Christ.

The Lord was descending upon Israel like a great and mighty lumberjack. Axe in hand, the Lord descends upon his own people. The time had come to bring down all that is lifted up. And that axe was the great Babylonian armies. So Isaiah writes,

Isaiah 2:12–17 — 12 For the day of the Lord of hosts Shall come upon everything proud and lofty, Upon everything lifted up— And it shall be brought low— 13 Upon all the cedars of Lebanon that are high and lifted up, And upon all the oaks of Bashan; 14 Upon all the high mountains, And upon all the hills that are lifted up; 15 Upon every high tower, And upon every fortified wall; 16 Upon all the ships of Tarshish, And upon all the beautiful sloops. 17 The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, And the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; The Lord alone will be exalted in that day,

Israel had forgotten the Lord; they no longer feared his wrath; they no longer longed for his promises. They had become consumed with a pursuit of something great

– they wanted a kingdom of glory, so they exalted themselves in their own eyes. God would come down with his axe, rendering Israel helpless and cut off. They would be carried off by the hands of the Babylonian armies in 586 B. C.

It was in this setting that Ezekiel would later prophesy. Ezekiel tells a parable, picturing the judgment. A great eagle with large wings and long claws will come to Israel and pluck off the highest branch; he will carry it away and plant it on another mountain, but it will dry up and wither. Then God himself will pluck a branch, a young sprout, and replant it on his own mountain. And then the LORD says,

Ezekiel 17:23–24 — 23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."

Israel was brought low. Their great city destroyed. Their kingdom lost. And for centuries to come, they would be subject to other kingdoms and other rulers. And in this setting, Christ would finally come. But he would come not for those who were exalted, but for those who had been brought low. He was not interested in the glorious pursuits of the Pharisees and scribes and religious class. He was interested in the small and insignificant; those who suffered; those who were broken; those who were sinners and knew it; these were the people that meant so much to Him; those who were just a speck in the eyes of the nations. And from that lowly estate he planted something new.

To what shall we compare his kingdom? Is it like the great Roman power that had expanded empire and armies and laws over all the nations? No, it is like a mustard seed. Something that must be let go of, dropped into the soil, lost from the eyes of the world. Hidden away in the soil, crucified, dead, and buried in the earth – Jesus was no king as the world would know it. Look at him. Powerless to overthrow the Jewish authorities who come at him with swords and clubs, powerless to free himself from the Roman ropes which hold his hands; powerless to help himself down from cross. Or so it seemed. Just a speck, now lost and buried in the earth.

But there he was in God's hands; who had reached into the soil, into death itself, fulfilling the wrath that he himself justly held against the world. And he took what was brought so low, and made so small, and made it into something great. When no one was looking, Jesus rose from the dead and sprouted something new, a twig that would be planted on the highest mountain, where all who believe would find shelter.

And there they found shelter. In the smallest of beginnings. No great and glorious temples – they met in house churches, hidden away from the Jews who rose up against them; unable to withstand the Romans who would soon outlaw their religion. But they would meet together; congregations of those who found shelter under Christ. And that shelter was all forgiving; all encompassing; all embracing; all glorious. The Kingdom of God Starts Small, But Becomes Great

2. The CLC is sown as something which seems small and insignificant, but which is sheltered by the eternally great grace of God.

The seeds were sown, and the centuries that would follow would prove God's promise to be true: what was once small, would become big. The Church would grow, and with it would also sprout up weeds. False teaching would plague the Church, always threatening to crowd out those who seek shelter. Time and time again, just like Israel, the Church would be drawn back to a pursuit for glory. A pursuit of something greater, something bigger. And in order to accomplish this, churches would have to compromise; they would seek to find the kingdom in some place other than where God has promised it.

This is why the Church of the Lutheran Confession was sown. Because other Lutheran churches were seeking something bigger at the expense of the kingdom. The ELCA is today the largest Lutheran church body in America. They boast over 4 million members in nearly 10,000 congregations in the United States. And in the 1930's and 40's this church body was the primary reason for why the CLC broke fellowship with the Wisconsin synod and the Missouri synod.

For over a century, the ELCA has been compromising, changing doctrines, making things more agreeable to the culture we live in; and so they have grown quite large. This is appealing to the world. It is appealing to our flesh. No need to suffer or face the pains of being humiliated at the cross. But such growth is not the growth of God's kingdom. Remember, the way that Israel was to recognize God's kingdom was by its strange lowliness. "And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."

In the eyes of the world, the CLC doesn't have much going for it. We are seemingly insignificant. How often don't you tell someone you belong to the CLC and they look at you sideways: "Ok. Is that like the ELCA?" Our numbers place us among the smallest church bodies in America. It is virtually unseen by the world – the Roman Catholics, the ELCA, Islam, Judaism – we are not on TV, in the news, or in Washington.

But the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. And here gathered around His word, not compromising, we are in the hands of God. And there we have his promise. There we have his hands, reaching into this soil, holding us, blessing us, cultivating His word among us, and there what once was so small, accomplishes something great.

How else could so much be done by so few? Look at our mission work overseas. What began in the 1980's with just one missionary and a few contacts, has grown to millions of brethren. And not through compromise. This is through thorough teaching of God's word. That is why we support these missionaries. That is why we support the building of seminaries. That is why we support ILC. CLC is seemingly insignificant in the eyes of the world, but God is able to do great things through this ministry of the gospel. The Kingdom of God Starts Small, But Becomes Great

3. The little congregation here at Ascension becomes a great and mighty thing in the hands of God

One of those small things that has happened as a result of those who left the ELCA and their false doctrine behind is this seed. This little congregation of believers, who gather every Sunday for shelter. I have met people who drive Wenmoth Road every day, who say, you're church is where? You mean the Sanctuary? No, we are the small church, set back from the road, under the shelter of the great tree out front. Does your church have a choir? No. Does your church have programs for the kids? Well, we have Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Does your church have day care? Well, we like having families together for the worship service. Your church has how many members?

Compared to the megachurches that people are more familiar with, our little congregation seems so strange. What are people looking for in a church? This is the question church leaders have been asking for decades. The model is constantly shifting. Some are looking for glitz and glamour – a great band and great coffee. Others are looking for something more mystical. A worship experience that makes them feel the presence of God. Some want a great speaker, someone who's publishing books and popular. Some want an experience that is more like their daily life – a tattoo convention, music that sounds like Metallica, a pastor who rides a motorcycle down the aisle, maybe a movie in church once and a while, talk about finances, talk about how to run a successful business or how to have a more intimate marriage. There are introverts who want to fade into the back ground, there are others extroverts who are offended if they are not greeted.

And so the model will shift again ... it will be one thing and then another. The doctrine will become one thing, and then another. And churches will grow large. But the kingdom of God is not like such things. It is like a mustard seed. And here, where it doesn't seem like much is going on, God is doing great things. We don't have much to offer compared to megachurches, but what we do have to offer is far greater. Because when this seed is sown, it will become even larger than I am. When the kingdom of God is sown it grows larger than any of us. And the opportunities are all around; but you need to stop looking for the big, dramatic, glorious things; and instead look in my hand, the little things matter: our children, our families, the person who asks you a probing question. Whether you're sharing a Bible passage, having a devotion at the dinner table, or visiting a friend in the hospital – the little things matter.

Just the other day, I was working in the garden, pulling weeds, and this one weed had sprung up more quickly than all the others. It looked different than the other weeds I had been pulling. And as I looked at it, and looked at the young sunflower plants that were just coming up, they looked the same. And I remembered, last year in that very spot I had planted sunflower seeds. And there it was, all the while waiting, hidden, yet suddenly springing up with new life. And when fully grown, those sunflower plants are as tall as I am.

Don't assume that just because you aren't seeing great and glorious results that nothing is happening. Even in your own life. The kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. It is the ruling activity of the Holy Spirit. As it grows, so grows our faith. Something that cannot be seen, but is believed and strengthened in Christ, until pretty soon you discover, this small thing has sprouted and is providing shelter for you in your most difficult times. For the Kingdom of God Starts Small, But placed into the hands of God, it becomes the greatest of all. Amen.