



Seasons of Love

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Brookside Community Church
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Mark 4:26-34

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Love is messy.

Love is uncontrollable.

For most of us, our ability to love grows in seasons.

We move from charity to solidarity, and then conversion.

We realize that our salvation is caught up in the salvation of others,

and then it becomes a force to be reckoned with.

Let us be like Jesus, planting seeds of the "kin-dom."

Let's be like mustard: "ooh, spicy"

Fathers are Like Trees

Sometimes, fathers want to be like trees. Trees were a common metaphor in the Bible for righteous. Psalm 1 says, “The righteous are like trees planted by streams of water that bear fruit every season.” Certainly, good fathers do that. We want to care for our loved ones in every season, and that is one of the many reasons we can celebrate this Father’s Day.

There is a particular kind of tree, however, that is used regularly in the Hebrew Scriptures to illustrate God’s dream for the people of Israel: the Cedar of Lebanon. You might say that the Hebrew Scriptures talk about the Cedar of Lebanon as the greatest kind of tree. It grows to be hundreds of feet tall. It was a symbol for the might and power. This is especially true of Ezekiel and Daniel. “Behold the cedar in Lebanon,” Ezekiel says, “with its fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs” (Ez 31:3). Tall, strong, sturdy, proud, respectable and predictable.

Jesus, this morning, doesn’t talk about the Cedars of Lebanon. Instead, it is almost like he mocks it. “You think this dream of God is about might and power, respectable and predictable. But God’s reign is more like mustard.”

Mustard?

Mustard is “Ooh, Spicy!”

My daughter Joey loves mustard. Actually, she loves any kind of condiments and tends to go a little overboard. Zion has this dip that she makes that is really heavy on the mustard. It is really, really good! Joey likes to take her hand and dip it in the ramekin and pull out a handful. Then...what happens next is cute, and we’ve come to expect it. She wrinkles up her nose and upper lip, puts her tongue to her teeth and says, “Ooh, spicy!”

Before studying this passage in the Bible, I honestly didn’t know much about mustard, other than that it can create this burning sensation in the back of your nose and make you feel like your going to go into convulsions: “ooh, spicy!”

A Tree, a Shrub, or a Weed?

Well, most of us know the parable of the mustard seed. Or, at least we think we do. Our imagination of what this parable means, though, is probably from Matthew 17 that says that those who have faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. So the point is that big and powerful things can have small beginnings. Like how a big, tall, righteous tree starts with just a little tree. The reign of God is like that...

Except, that is not exactly what Jesus said. And the writers of the Gospels appear almost to debate over this. They all know Jesus was talking about a mustard seed. And here is one of those

illustrations of how we know Mark was the oldest. As time went on, the writers of the gospels tried to sanitize Jesus' sayings. So where in Mark we have Jesus saying that the reign of God is like mustard seeds, the smallest of all seeds. You scatter them on the ground, and then you get "the greatest of all shrubs" (Mk 4:26-34). But Matthew then says the seeds are to be planted in a field, becomes greater than the herbs, even becoming a tree" (Mt 13:31-32). Luke takes it even further, saying that the seeds are planted in a garden and it becomes a large tree.

There is no doubt that the "great things have small beginnings" interpretation still fits. But the interesting thing here is that Jesus has taken this action image of the righteousness being like tall trees and almost mocked it. The kingdom, Jesus said, is like a shrub. (Better yet, mustard is like a weed.)

John Dominic Crossan puts it this way: "The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, [more] like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses -- if you could control it."¹

Small, careful doses—because, remember, mustard is "ooh, spicy!"

William Herzog says, "The goal of sowing it is not to turn it into something it isn't (a tree) but to maximize what it is (a ubiquitous shrub), a force to be reckoned with."²

We try too much like a church to grow like a cedar tree. We want a strong future, but one we can control. We want to be strong, tall, and in charge. But the kin-dom of God is not like that. It is wild. It is "an agent of confusion." It is dangerous. It is "a force to be reckoned with."

To Become Kin-dom People

And if we aren't called to become strong, tall, and in charge, then the term "Kingdom" probably doesn't work any more. God's dream for the world is not to build a "kingdom" where Christians can use our religion to push people around and organize the world according to our own agenda. We are supposed to scatter seeds and watch as God confuses the world with a radical, wild, untamable love.

So, what do we use instead of "kingdom"? I often use a phrase by Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, the phrase "Kin-dom" of God. She said that the Kin-dom of God is present when the fullness of God becomes a

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 278-279. *Jesus, the Revolutionary Gospel*, p. 89.

² William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 206.

day to day reality in our lives, where we are Kin to each other, true brothers and sisters where the good of the whole is the good of the individual.

Sowing the Mustard Kin-dom?

Seeds start off small, and then they grow. Kin-dom seeds take off and become uncontrollable. Our job is not to control it, but simply scatter the seeds everywhere!

I want to leave you with this thought. The seeds of the kin-dom are not merely like charity. As we have said in our conversations before, charity is not bad. But it is more like a seed for big, tall cedar trees. You've seen them. When they charity is at its best, it helps a few people. Mostly though, it helps the giver. When charity is at its worst, it grows tall and strong like a big cedar tree, with administrative roots, making a little difference, but large enough that the world can see

Jesus, on the other hand, calls us to go beyond charity to solidarity. Solidarity is what happens when we go from just giving, to learning to love. And by love, I mean specifically loving those the world tries to convince us are unlovable. That is what Jesus did. He loved the outcast, the oppressed, the left out, the lost, the disease and dispossessed—and started a movement that changed the world. That is the story of the beginning of our tradition. Think about it, what if we began to see ourselves as initiating the “kin-dom” and start caring about the chronically homeless as if they were our own flesh and blood? That might be wild and dangerous. The next thing you know, you might have too many of them and you are no longer in control.

That, by the way is what happened to Rudy Rasmus. He started a church in an abandoned building in Houston. He said to his community, “I will not be a part of an institution or religion that judges or marginalizes a person based on race, abilities, gender, orientation, identity, or social status...but I will be a part of a Love Revolution that fights for the right of people everywhere to love and be loved by God.” The next thing you know, within a few years, his church became one of the largest in the country. His church now is part of a large complex with apartment buildings, non-profits, and food and health programs. The most striking thing for me, however, is not just that he is Beyonce's pastor—but that his congregation has a large percentage of people who are homeless. It started out that way. That is what solidarity does.

As the seasons of love pass, it not only bears lasting fruit...but it spreads, wild, and becomes “a force to be reckoned with.” Like Joey says, it's “ooh, spicy!”

I'm not sure what sowing the seeds of love looks like at Brookside. But if we are in the business of following Jesus and sowing mustard/kin-dom seeds, it will be risky. It will get out of hand. But if we are faithful, a love that is out of hand grows into something life-giving to the world, a force to be reckoned with! So together, my challenge for us today. Can we put aside the dreams of becoming big and righteous, stop trying to be kingdom builders and become sowers of the “kin-dom”? Ask yourselves, are we able to get a little “ooh spicy?”