

Betsey Moe
IA Sermon
“The Small and Subversive”

Matthew 13:31-33

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Thank you so much for inviting us to share in worship with you this morning. Eric and I are traveling most of this summer, visiting seven different Sunday worship services and a total of fifteen congregations in nine presbyteries. It is a blessing to be able to see God’s people gathered in so many unique places and connect with wonderful people in each place.

I also bring warm greetings from CEDEPCA in Guatemala, a long-time partner of the PC(USA). CEDEPCA is the Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America. Their staff, now made up of 20 men and women, has been working for justice and social change through theological education for nearly four decades. I work at CEDEPCA as a Facilitator for Intercultural Encounters, meaning that I lead groups of people who come to Guatemala either virtually or in-person to learn about history and culture as well as political, social, and economic realities. My colleagues at CEDEPCA were so excited that I was traveling here to be with you, to represent them, and to bring to you some stories of hope and renewal that we as a staff have seen and experienced lately. Thank you for making space for me here; by supporting Eric and me as Mission Co-Workers, you support CEDEPCA and their mission of offering education that transforms.

As I thought about what text to preach on today that might relate to what I have seen God doing in Guatemala, I was drawn to this pair of short parables: a man planted mustard seed in his field, and those seeds grew into large, shade-giving shrubs. A woman worked a little bit of yeast into a huge quantity of flour (three measures equals about fifty pounds), and the whole batch rose.

Whenever I stumble across these two little parables, my mind goes to two possible interpretations: the first is growth – how the church grows bigger and bigger, having kind of a ripple effect; and the second is believing that small actions we do can make a difference – picking up trash, smiling at someone on the street, reading a book to a child.

But as I look closer at these parables, I think there is something more going on beyond what is obvious to us. Jesus used parables to get people to think differently about life, to question

reality. Parables gave people alternate perspectives to chew on when they went back into their everyday routines. And these are no different; there is something odd in these parables that invites us to think about the gospel in a different way.

Here's what I mean by odd: both the mustard seed and yeast carried negative connotations for the first-century people. Mustard seeds would not have been seeds that a farmer would have planted in a field. Mustard plants covered hillsides in Palestine – not on purpose – and their little seeds would blow every which way, taking root, and growing new plants amidst already-established crops. They were like noxious weeds, invasive plants to get rid of at any cost: burn 'em, spray 'em, pull 'em out. So to hear Jesus say that the kingdom of heaven is like a farmer sowing a mustard seed in his field would have sounded wrong. You don't *plant* mustard seeds, just like you don't plant dandelion seeds in your yard.

Yeast likewise was a negative image; it was a symbol of corruption. In speaking, people would refer to others as yeast like we might use the term “bad apple.” The Apostle Paul talked about yeast in a negative way when he told the Corinthians to get rid of all forms of immorality like they would get rid of yeast in a house, alluding to the symbolic Passover practice of clearing out the leaven before the meal. Even Jesus says, “Beware of the yeast (or corruption) of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). So why would Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven to images like yeast and a mustard seed, images that were so off-putting to people at the time?

One of the projects CEDEPCA is in the middle of growing and developing right now is actually a pair of projects called Tamar and José. Tamar workshops were started for girls in Guatemalan communities where the number of births to mothers between the ages of 10 and 14 were shockingly high. These numbers made the women's ministry at CEDEPCA sit up and take notice; the fact that ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen-year-old girls are giving birth is a sign that something is terribly wrong in a community, that intrafamilial rape is happening behind closed doors, that violence has been normalized. And someone needed to speak out. CEDEPCA formed what is called the Tamar project in 2016, teaching young girls their rights, teaching them that they are created in God's image and worthy of respect, that they have God-given gifts beyond sweeping and washing dishes and making tortillas and raising babies. But that's not all. The José (Joseph) Project was formed in 2020 to offer workshops with the same kind of information for adolescent boys, teaching them that the Bible does *not* say that they are superior to or have authority over girls, and that being a real man means showing love and respect and tenderness, that it means being vulnerable and non-violent.

You can bet that certain people, certain groups, see these workshops as off-putting, as threatening the status quo. If women rise up and get educated, who will take care of the home? Who will serve the men? If men let down their façade of toughness, who will be the protectors? What if men lose respect and credibility? Not to mention the fact that for many it is *uncomfortable* to talk about violence and women's bodies in public settings. The dominant culture sees workshops like Tamar and José as mustard seeds in a field where they don't belong, or as yeast working its sinister way through a whole batch of dough.

Another project we visit regularly is the Utz Pan bakery apprentice program in Guatemala City, where six adolescents, a mix of girls and boys, are learning to bake and run a business together so that they have the incentive and means to stay in Guatemala rather than migrate to the U.S. out of necessity. This program is housed at a Pentecostal church in the heart of one of the city's "Red Zones" – a neighborhood marked by gang violence and extortion. These kids, who would have very few opportunities otherwise, are thriving. (And as a side note, the bakery is possible, in part, with funding from the Self-Development of People program of PC(USA). If you have given to the One Great Hour of Sharing, you have supported these kids.

You would think that everyone would support a program like this. Family members, community leaders, politicians. And for the most part, they do. But the economic system *itself* threatens the program's success. One young baker who showed particular promise and leadership had to drop out early on because his *father* migrated north and he needed to step up and work more hours to support his mother and his siblings.

Where the gospel is lived out, there is going to be resistance. Established systems and powers-that-be are threatened by the inbreaking of justice and abundant life for all.

Jesus himself experienced that truth in his body. He came to usher in the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven, transforming not just lives, but *systems*, so that all people may experience deep, abundant life. Jesus boldly brought change despite the push-back of religious and civil authorities. When Jesus dared to heal those deemed unworthy, when Jesus encouraged and empowered women, when Jesus lifted up children as models of faith, he planted mustard seeds in established fields, worked little cakes of yeast through massive amounts of flour. But the system itself resisted Jesus. As John wrote, "He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). Where the gospel is lived out, there will be resistance; but it will continue to spread, because the living God is at work.

What if THAT reality is what these parables are trying to describe?

You could say that these parables are about Jesus himself, the mustard seed; Jesus himself, the yeast. Ultimately, Jesus was condemned and killed by the system. Leaders thought they could put an end to the change by putting an end to his life. But the reign of God had already begun and could not be stopped. Jesus may have been buried like a seed in the ground, like a bit of yeast hidden in flour, but that death was only the beginning. It was the beginning of a rising that would continue bringing life and healing and reconciliation through the Body of Christ, the church.

I love the image in the parable of the mustard seed of what the end result looks like: birds make nests in the thin branches of the mustard shrub. In Ezekiel and in the Psalms, there is a prophecy about Israel, God's people, being like a mighty cedar where the birds of the air make their nests. Jesus subverts this image in the parable. God's people are like the "mighty" wispy mustard shrub! You know what kind of birds make nests in mustard shrubs? Little ones.

Vulnerable ones. And that is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. The most *marginalized* people finding refuge.

I also love the image of what happens to the yeast working its way through 50 pounds of flour. Fifty pounds – this is a huge batch! We're talking bread enough to feed a hungry hillside of people who have nowhere else to get bread. That's what the gospel is. When the kingdom of heaven is afoot, vulnerable people find shelter. Hungry people are fed. We're all celebrating abundant life – together.

Systems still oppress and threaten to undo us all. But the church is called and equipped by the Spirit of the living God to be bold, to continue to stand up to systems that oppress us and our neighbors and our beloved Earth. We are called to plant mustard seeds in places where institutions have decided only certain crops that benefit only a few are allowed to grow. We are called to work a little bit of yeast through an intimidating amount of flour, keep speaking truth into systems that we cannot imagine changing, and then watch as lives are changed one by one.

We are most ourselves as church when we are living into and bringing abundant life to all – shelter, food, dignity, welcome.

These parables – the mustard seed and the yeast – are about so much more than “church growth” as we traditionally think of it. Growth in the economy of salvation is the expansion of abundant life for all despite constant obstacles. It's about Guatemalan girls learning their inherent worth and asking to go to school beyond sixth grade. It's about young people living in a Red Zone learning to run a business. It's about communities here in the United States coming together to find housing solutions, healthcare solutions, immigration solutions that benefit the most vulnerable.

This is God's work. This is what the kingdom of heaven looks like.

And so may we be bold together; may we expect pushback to the gospel and not be discouraged; may we work for change believing that it's possible within our lifetime – because it is Jesus Christ, the living God, going before us. Amen.