The Parable of the Mustard Seed is one that many of us have heard before. It is an oft referenced story and like many of the parables, Jesus challenges us with his use of symbolism and hyperbole which provides us with opportunities for reflection and conversation. I imagine Christ’s disciples and his first century audience after they heard this message looking at one another and puzzling over his words. “Mustard? What is he talking about?” “What did you get out of that?” Today, rather than settle for the single easy answer why not let the parable challenge us as we, too, puzzle and wrestle with its meaning.

First, let’s look at the pieces we are given in this parable. We have a mustard seed, a tiny little thing. The seed itself isn’t really worth anything on its own, but its potential is great. Jesus says, when it grows it becomes the largest of all shrubs and becomes a tree. We should note also that mustard, once planted germinates and spreads on its own, it grows much like a weed and really doesn’t need much help in cultivation. Mustard is also desirable, it was commonly used as medicine, when added to food it adds great spice and flavor.

We also have an action, a man took mustard seed and *planted* it in his field. Hold on to this imagery for a moment.

When we study this text and look into commentaries and analysis of the meaning of the mustard seed parable, there are actually numerous interpretations and ideas as to what Jesus meant and the meaning behind the riddles and symbols. For instance, when I was in Sunday school in my elementary years, I was taught that the mustard seed in this story represents faith. I think that is a common interpretation, those who are familiar with the New Testament may remember that Jesus says “if you have but faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to a mountain ‘move from here to there’ and it will move.” So to us the connection makes some sense; it’s the mustard seed which is our faith that is super tiny, yet mighty enough to move mountains, which is now like the Kingdom of Heaven, which starts off really tiny but when it’s planted becomes really, really big? \*However, when we look at Jesus’ teachings chronologically, when he told today’s parable as far as we know, he had yet to liken a mustard seed to the power of faith. Thus, his first century audience may not have made this same connection.

Another common interpretation says that Christ is talking about the rise and fall empires, the Kingdom of God coming up from within the Roman nation. In the book of Ezekiel ch. 17 the Lord says, “I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a Cedar and plant it. I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain Heights of Israel I 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.” I'm talking about the house of King David, and in the old testament, David's Kingdom was established, grew large, it was divided, conquered and eventually carried off into captivity. But now says the prophet, after all these years that kingdom is going to be restored God says it is going to grow to be a mighty cedar.

So perhaps, Jesus is making a stark contrast to the people’s expectation of the coming empire. Not a noble cedar, a might oak, or a giant redwood, but a tiny mustard seed, which becomes a tree “the greatest of all shrubs.” (Matt 13) Maybe the connection to be made is that if you scatter the seeds of the Kingdom, it will grow, but not in the way you expected?

According to the millennial preacher, Ryan Roberts, “the parables are not as accessible as they once were. If Jesus was with us today, he might not be talking about scattering and sowing seeds.” I would say if Jesus was here, he might say that the Kingdom of God is like an internet video that unexpectedly goes viral. Be reassured, “Going viral” has nothing to do with the current Corona-19 pandemic. Going viral is when a video that is posted to the internet is widely shared, or spread through internet sites such as Youtube, social media (facebook, twitter) and through email. In a short amount of time, a single video can reach millions of people across the globe. Do you remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? The Ice Bucket Challenge was viral video challenge that began with golfer Chris Kennedy to raise funds and awareness for ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease.) The videos involved the individual subjecting him/herself to having a bucket of ice water dumped on their head, acknowledging the ALS cause, and then challenging someone else to the same activity. Over the summer of 2014, these videos spread across the globe. Over these few months, supporters raised more than $115 million for the ALS Association through the Ice Bucket Challenge. Perhaps the Kingdom of Heaven is like a short personal video, that spans the continents and rallies millions seemingly overnight.

According to author Amy-Jill Lavine, the “Parables as stories as well as sacred scripture always have to take on new meaning. In literature we're always reading text differently that's why we can continue to read, and study Shakespeare or Faulkner and generations of students will come up with different interpretations.” She also says, “when it comes to sacred scripture, the church speaks about the operation of the Holy Spirit which teaches people how to understand the word in their own location in their own time. So, if we say it can only mean one thing and that's it, in effect we've put the Holy Spirit out of business.” To quote one of my favorite theology professors, “Never try to put God in a box, He’s just not gonna fit.” Anytime you interpret biblical text you should ask, ‘what does this text mean to me?’ and ‘how can I apply this message to my life?’ “As long as it's a compassionate interpretation, and it's an interpretation that helps you live out a better life or helps you better fulfill what you think god's will is, helps you love your neighbor better you've got a good reading. it may not be the original reading, it may not be what Jesus intended his 1st century audience to hear, but still it’s a good reading because it's still the holy spirit moving in you and still your god given imagination interacting with that text.”--AJL

When we look at the parables and other scripture in this way, what we find is this fascinating collection of stories and poems and histories and wisdom that speaks to something so much more than the size of seeds.

Let’s again look back at the pieces of the mustard seed parable. A tiny seed with mighty potential, and the simple action of planting in the field. There is definitely an underlying theme of the power of the individual, the small and seemingly insignificant yielding great and unexpected results.

I believe Jesus’ point in today’s story is that the Kingdom of God begins in ways we can barely even grasp. If you have ever felt the profound impact that a small moment or kind gesture can have, you know what Jesus is talking about here. Never underestimate what a small act of grace can mean or begin in someone else. A smile for someone who has felt ignored, a kind word for someone who's had a really rough day. There are 1000 ways that small gestures can transform our experience of grace and invite us into something actually divine. Where are the mightiest works of the Kingdom accomplished? In our hearts, our attitudes, it the way we choose to treat our neighbor. What this means is once the Kingdom of Heaven takes root, it actually takes very little to begin enormous changes in your life and in the lives of others.