

Smallest to Greatest

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Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word.

We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark. You'll remember that the Gospels tell the story of Jesus and His life and His death and His resurrection, and we're continuing in chapter 4, where Jesus has been teaching us about the kingdom of God.

He's been using this agricultural image, the image of the seed that is sown. Last week, we saw the power of the seed, the resilience of the seed. This week, we're going to look at the seed from a different angle. We're going to see its initial smallness.

And so we'll look at the growth of the seed, the ultimate size of the seed. Last week, we were encouraged by the reminder that the kingdom is working, even when we don't see it.

[1 : 18] This week, we're encouraged that the kingdom is powerful, even when it doesn't meet up to worldly standards, even when it would appear to be small and insignificant.

And in fact, my guess is if you're a Christian, you feel that at times. If Jesus is the king, why isn't the church more effective, better funded, more powerful?

If the kingdom is so powerful, why are we still here 2,000 years later? Why don't we see more of a victory over evil? Why is there such a big difference, a big gap between what we've been promised is to come and what we see right now in this world?

There may be times where we're discouraged or confused by the smallness of God's kingdom. It's with that challenge that we come to God's word.

And so I invite you to turn with me. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn in your worship guide to the sermon passage. You can turn on your phone. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word.

[2 : 26] And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which means that God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his word to show us the way to go.

And so that's why we read now Mark chapter 4, starting at verse 13. And he said, With many such parables, he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear.

He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples, he explained everything. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Father in heaven, we thank you that your word is powerful and effective. It's your word that brings something out of nothing. And it's your word that brings dead things to life.

And we confess this morning that without the help of your spirit, the power of your word, we are dead on arrival. So we simply ask for those things this morning, that you would give us your spirit to use your word in a powerful way, that we would be challenged by it, encouraged by it, and that we would see Jesus.

[4 : 08] We ask that you do these simple things as we look at what you have to say to us here in the gospel of Mark. We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. It's common knowledge, I think, or at least I hope, that we now know that redwood trees are the tallest of all trees in the world, and you'll find many of them on the coast of California.

You may also know that National Geographic ran a documentary series for about 25 years called National Geographic Explorer. And in 2009, they ran one episode called Climbing Redwood Giants, which tracks a variety of people who interact with these redwoods in California.

One of them is a man named Michael Nichols, who was a photographer for National Geographic, and he was frustrated by the fact that none of the photos of these redwood trees did them justice. People would come to the redwood forest, and they would be overwhelmed with this sense of awe and transcendence. But when they looked at a picture, they would just think, ah, that's a nice tall tree. And so he wanted to fill that gap between the in-person experience and the viewing of a picture.

[5 : 20] The problem is that these trees are typically over 300 feet tall. And he wanted to take a picture that showed the tree all the way from the top down to the bottom.

Turns out this is more challenging than you might expect. He spent 21 days camped out in the forest trying to get one picture. They would set up every morning with his crew before dawn, and he'd have someone at the top of the tree who would give them the go signal as soon as he saw the sun.

They had a camera that they had to back up 50 feet away from the tree because the crown of the tree at the very top was 100 feet wide. And this robotic camera essentially had many different lenses on it, and it would drop from the top all the way to the bottom.

And so they would try day after day after day trying to get the right picture with the right sunlight at the right time. He said this, his goal is to capture the grandeur of a giant redwood tree in one image. Day 14, they finally got the picture they wanted, except it wasn't just one picture. They took 84 different pictures and pieced them all together.

[6 : 30] These 84 pictures that were pieced together into one image formed a five-page foldout in the National Geographic issue that came out in October of 2009.

At the beginning of this documentary, the narrator tells us, even giants start small with modest cones packed with seeds no bigger than tomatoes.

And so this giant redwood tree, the tallest of all trees in the world, over 300 feet tall, some of the tallest ones much larger than that, starts with a seed no larger than a tomato.

He is comparing for us the beginning and the end. And that's the same thing Jesus does for us in this passage. He wants us to feel the difference, the contrast between the beginning and the end of the kingdom of God.

We see here, verse 30, there's something difficult about understanding the kingdom. It doesn't meet our expectations. It's counterintuitive, which is why he asks this question, with what can we compare the kingdom of God or what parable shall we use for it?

[7 : 38] In other words, it's hard to find the right example because this is such a strange, unusual thing. The kingdom operates in such a way that's different from our expectations and our experience.

So what in the world are we going to have that would actually help us begin to wrap our minds around it? And he tells us, well, it has to be something, verse 31, that starts out as the smallest. Verse 32 ends up as the largest. Whatever our parable is, it has to be something that starts out as the smallest, ends up as the largest.

Before we dive deep into that, by the way, our points this morning are very simple. One, the smallest. Two, the largest. I want to make sure we review and understand what it is that we're talking about when we use the phrase, the kingdom of God.

I talked last week about this temptation to use what's called God talk, which is when we throw all these phrases around that sound spiritual and we have no idea what we're talking about.

[8 : 36] Kingdom of God can fall into this category. People throw it around and use it. If you ask them to define it, would they actually be able to tell you what in the world they're talking about? There's all sorts of books and articles written trying to define this, and I'm going to give you this very simple definition that I gave you last week.

When we talk about the kingdom of God, we are simply talking about the place where Jesus is king. When we are talking about the kingdom of God, we're talking about the place where Jesus is king. This is the place where Jesus is loved and worshiped and obeyed. We see the kingdom only in part right now because not everyone loves, obeys, or worships the king.

We will one day see the kingdom in full because one day everyone will worship and recognize Jesus as king. In fact, this is what Paul tells us in Philippians chapter two.

He says, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[9 : 39] We will see the kingdom in full when every tongue confesses Jesus as Lord. We don't see that yet. And so now what we see, and this is the quote I gave you last week from Martin Lloyd-Jones, is the kingdom shows up in the hearts and lives of his people.

Jesus' kingdom shows up in the hearts and lives of his people. In fact, if you look on page five of your worship guide, you'll see I gave you that same quote all over again. It's the best quote that I've ever found on the kingdom of God.

And he uses that phrase, the very last sentence, he is certainly ruling in that way, in the hearts and lives of all his people. And so we prayed this morning in the Lord's prayer that God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven.

And what we are praying when we pray that is that you and other people would worship and love and obey Jesus as king more and more. We don't have to give in to God talk.

We can clarify our terms. That is what we mean when we talk about the kingdom of God, the place where Jesus is king. And so jumping right back in, remember our two points are very simple, the smallest and the biggest.

[10 : 49] First of all, this kingdom, this place where Jesus is king is the smallest. Verse 31, it is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.

The kingdom of God is small in many different ways. I'll give you guys some ideas, but it's small from a worldly perspective. The things that this world expects and demands of a kingdom, the kingdom of God does not meet up to those expectations.

It does not rise to the height that one would think it would. And it doesn't do this in a variety of ways. First of all, the logic of the cross is the smallest.

The cross is weak and foolish from a worldly perspective. In fact, Paul, the apostle, says this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 1. He says, the cross is foolishness to the world.

And here is the sense in which it's foolish. It is foolish, as is often said, because it is an instrument of torture that's used as an instrument of salvation.

[11 : 54] It is foolish because it's an instrument of torture used as an instrument of salvation. It is scandalous. The cross does not make sense to the world.

It does not make sense that strength would come through weakness. The image of the cross that we have now has been domesticated over time. Initially, it was extremely shocking.

In fact, there's this book called Dominion, How the Christian Revolution Remade the World by a man named Tom Holland, and he notes that artists were not willing to use the cross as an image until AD 400.

It took 400 years for people to even be willing to use the image. That's how scandalous it was. In fact, he says this, divinity was for the very greatest of the great, for victors and heroes and kings. Its measure was the power to torture one's enemies, not to suffer it oneself. That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, and grotesque.

[13 : 08] That such a god of all gods might have had a son and that this son, suffering the fate of a slave, might have been tortured to death on a cross were claims as stupefying as they were to most Jews' repellent.

No more shocking a reversal of their most avoutly held assumptions could possibly have been imagined. Not merely blasphemy, it was madness.

The cross is the smallest. It is small and weak from a worldly perspective. It makes no sense whatsoever to use an instrument of torture as an instrument of salvation.

It's not just the logic of the cross, though, that it's the smallest. It's also the people of the cross who are the smallest. And by the people of the cross, I mean you and me. Paul does not pay us any compliments in 1 Corinthians 1 because he doesn't just say that the cross is foolish.

He says, you are foolish. He says this, verse 26, for consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful.

[14 : 17] Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and

despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.

So when Jesus came to set up his kingdom, he decided to pick a brain trust of the smartest possible people he could find with the greatest gifts that he had seen in advance.

And he picked them for that reason, leaving out people who didn't meet up to his standards. No. The complete opposite. Jesus comes in his kingdom and he picks those who are not wise, those who are not powerful, those who are not noble birth, those who are foolish, those who are weak, those who are not strong, those who are low and despised.

The kingdom is the smallest. The foolishness, the smallness of the kingdom is this then. There are many from Harvard that will reject it and high school dropouts who will embrace it.

There are many who are rich who will reject it and those who are poor who will embrace it. There are those who are virtuous who will reject it. Those who are obnoxious who will enter the kingdom of God.

[15 : 33] Now having educated of the kingdom doesn't shock us as much as it does the Roman world. Our values are different. What's shocking for us is that obnoxious people would get into the kingdom and virtuous people would not.

Jesus chooses the smallest. It's foolish and small and weak in the sense that Jesus presents to his followers a way of suffering rather than luxury.

The gospel does not fit into the expectations and standards of this world. It's not just the logic of the cross.

It's not just the people of the cross who are small and foolish though. It's also the king of the cross. Jesus did not come as a beautiful person. He came as small compared to the kings of this world. Jesus shows up in a stable rather than a palace. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a war horse. Jesus has a crown of thorns rather than a crown of gold.

[16 : 36] Isaiah tells us, in fact, that there was nothing attractive about Jesus that would draw people to him. Isaiah 53 too. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.

If Christianity was a blind taste test, remember you see these from time to time, right? People will have Pepsi and Coke but they won't tell you which is which and you're supposed to taste it and recognize what's correct and good.

Maybe you have a new product compared to a name brand product and without knowing what it is you're tasting, you're able to pick up on certain things. If there was a blind taste test of Christianity, the normal flavor outside of God's spirit would be this.

Obscure, weak, insignificant, powerless, foolish, shameful. That's what the cross tastes like to this world. That's what Paul is telling us in 1 Corinthians 1.

Others, on the other hand, taste it and say this, it tastes like the power of God. God uses the small and foolish things of this world.

[17 : 48] Jesus teaches this parable because it is something that's relevant and real for these people and for us as well. It's hitting at something perhaps you feel.

Perhaps you feel at times that the kingdom is in fact small and little and insignificant. It is corporations and governments that have money and power. If God is the king, if his kingdom is the greatest, why is it that Apple and Facebook and Amazon have such great levels of influence and power?

If God's kingdom is the greatest and he's the king, why is it that Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates are the ones with all the money? Why isn't it the church?

Because the kingdom is small and weak and foolish. We saw the parable of the soils a while back. Chapter 4, verses 1 through 20.

Why is it that the world is so alluring? Why is it that these thorns are able to come in and crush the seed of the kingdom? Well, it's because the kingdom is weak and insignificant by the numbers.

[18 : 53] It is not what is most alluring and beautiful. Jesus needs to teach this to his disciples and to us because the kingdom is not what they expected.

Jesus' followers wanted a rapid onset kingdom. They wanted an immediate kingdom. They wanted a powerful earthly kingdom. And Jesus here instead resets their expectations.

It is not going to be what you want. It is going to be the smallest kingdom. The question, though, that's still unanswered is, why? Why is it that the kingdom comes in such smallness?

Why didn't Jesus come with a royal train? Why didn't he come with a real crown? Why didn't he ride in Jerusalem on a war horse? Well, Paul answers that question for us as well near the end of 1 Corinthians 1.

He says, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, verse 29, here's the answer, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

[20 : 02] God chose a small and foolish kingdom to highlight his grace so that no one could congratulate themselves for being a part of it, so that no one could pat themselves on the back that they were smart enough, powerful, and rich enough to be part of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom starts and looks small to show God's glory. It's meant to highlight God's grace. It's meant to show God's glory.

In fact, we know this intuitively, right? There is something beautiful and marvelous about small things turning into great things. The smallness of the seed is part of what makes the redwood so majestic and impressive.

You think to yourself, that large tree came from that small seed? It would make sense, right, if it came from a big seed. And yet, that's not how it works, right?

That's why the narrator of the documentary mentions it. He says, even giants start small with modest cones packed with seeds no bigger than tomatoes. The redwood tree, in other words, is not large because it started large.

[21 : 21] It's large because of the power of the seed. The kingdom of God is not large because it started large. It is large because of the power of the gospel.

The smallness of the kingdom shows us the power of God. The gospel is beautiful and powerful, just not the way we expect it.

And so that's why Paul also tells us in 1 Corinthians 1, the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. It's smallness, the fact that it's insignificant and weak is a feature, not a bug.

Thankfully, it's not just the smallness of the kingdom that we see here, though. That was verse 31. We also have verse 32, the greatest kingdom. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants.

Yes, it's a small and foolish kingdom and it will not be like that forever. That's how it starts. It's not how it ends. We have the small seed of the redwood tree and then we have the tallest tree in the entire world, well over 300 feet tall.

[22 : 43] same thing is here is true in the Bible. We have what we see of the kingdom in the gospel of Mark and we fast forward in the Bible to the very last book, the book of Revelation and we see the comeuppance of the kingdom.

We see the final victory of the kingdom. There's this progression between what is true in Jesus' first coming when Jesus came as a baby into this world and what's true in Jesus' second coming.

The coming that we look forward to when Jesus returns to this world as the victorious king taking his kingdom. And so we can compare not just the smallest seed to the greatest tree, we can also compare the smallness of the kingdom in the gospel of Mark to the greatest kingdom that we see in the book of Revelation.

We can have a side-by-side picture. Yes, Jesus has a crown of thorns in his earthly ministry. In the book of Revelation, he comes not just with one crown but with multiple crowns.

Revelation chapter 19, verse 12. His eyes are like a flame of fire and on his head are many diadems. Diadem being a fancy word for crown. And he has a name written that no one knows but himself.

[23 : 48] Yes, in his earthly ministry, Jesus comes in on a donkey and in the book of Revelation when he returns in his second coming, we see Jesus riding in on a war horse. Revelation 19, 11.

Then I saw heaven open to behold a white horse. The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True and in righteousness he judges and makes wars. Yes, it's true that Jesus in his earthly ministry comes and appears in a stable and when we find him after his second coming in the book of Revelation, he is not sitting in a stable but he is on a throne.

Revelation chapter 22, verse 3. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it. Yes, the kingdom is small now.

It will not be small forever. Yes, we struggle with these doubts in this world just like these other disciples wondering if Jesus is truly the king that he says that he is coming to bring the kingdom that's been promised.

Why does it seem so underwhelming and powerless? And Jesus comes with this parable and encouragement to his people to remind them, yes, it may seem small and insignificant and weak and foolish and shameful now but we are looking forward to the day when it will be great and powerful and majestic.

[25 : 02] Not just great but the greatest of all the nations and kingdoms. It starts as the smallest of seeds. It will be the greatest of trees.

Jesus then is giving us his followers the critical assurance that we need as we follow him as our king into his kingdom in this world which is this that ultimate victory is guaranteed and it is coming. God's power is going to show up in an even greater and more majestic way than we can imagine now. It's the reminder that we saw together week after week in the book of Daniel that no matter how bad things get God is still in control.

No matter how bad things get no matter how small and weak and insignificant things are we can know and trust that God's kingdom is still coming and it will come in full.

Jesus here is giving us a vision of future orientation that we look forward to the great tree. Brothers and sisters as we live as Christians in this world at times feeling like we're stumbling along we also look forward to the greatest tree.

[26 : 15] We look forward to God's kingdom knowing that it will come in its fullness and it will be a place of God's holiness and justice and goodness and mercy and love. It will be the great tree to which all the nations come.

It will be the kingdom above every other kingdom. In fact that's also what we see in the book of Revelation which includes in chapter 22 a tree.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. Also on either side of the river the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit yielding its fruit each month.

The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. I'm going to read that last sentence again. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

That's the same imagery we saw in our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel and the imagery we see here verse 32. Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

[27 : 38] Remember we read from Ezekiel. I encourage you by the way if you look in your worship guide on pages 3 and 4 it's something you can do if you show up early to our worship service and take a minute to look at our Old Testament passage and how it relates to our New Testament passage.

I'm not going to go into it all now but you'll see there's an explanation there on pages 3 and 4 how it is that Ezekiel 17 connects here to our passage and the main point is this. In Ezekiel 17 we see all these different kinds of birds finding shelter in a tree.

Those birds represent the nations of the earth. In Mark chapter 4 we see all these different birds coming to take shelter in a tree. Those birds represent the nations of the earth.

In other words the kingdom's greatness is expressed in the fact that all different people from every type and nation and tongue will come to be a part of God's kingdom and worship him.

This is the image that we're given throughout the Old Testament that Jesus brings into reality in the New Testament which is that the kingdom of God is not just for Jews it is for anyone and everyone in this world who comes and recognizes Jesus as the true and great king.

[28 : 51] All the nations of the earth will come and be a part of this. And so we begin to see again the logic of why the kingdom must be small and become great not just to highlight God's greatness and his glory although yes that is true but also because it is the smallness that leads to the greatness.

In other words the only way that Jesus can bring all the nations to find shelter in his tree is if he dies for their sins. It is by coming as a suffering savior that he's able to enable and empower people from every tribe and nation and tongue to come and worship him because those who are finding shelter under the tree are those who have come to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior recognizing that he is the one and true king who they worship and love and serve and obey.

And it's Jesus' death that makes that possible. It's the smallness of the kingdom that enables the greatness. It's because Jesus came to die that he's able to provide shelter for all the birds. It's because of his death that he's able to come and bring people from all over the world to be a part of his kingdom. The ultimate greatness of the kingdom is for you.

The ultimate greatness of the kingdom is that Jesus is able to bring you to be a part of it. The flip side, however, of the tree is this.

[30 : 23] Yes, Jesus will rule over the nations. He'll provide shelter for the nations. And those who choose not to find shelter in him will perish.

There are birds who choose to find shelter under this tree and those who do not. And so, brothers and sisters, the choice for us is clear.

There are only two ways to live in this world. We can live finding shelter under the tree of the kingdom of God or we can perish apart from it. Those are the only two choices God gives us in this world.

We have to embrace the smallness of the kingdom to experience its greatness. We have to follow the path that Jesus gives us in Mark 1, verse 15, that we repent and believe the gospel.

We recognize that it is not a path of victory first but of suffering just like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that is how he provides for the nations to find shelter.

[31 : 30] In the show Climbing the Redwood Giants, they don't just cover that photographer. They also follow this forest ecologist named Steve Sillett. And Steve wants to be the first person to explore the canopy of redwood trees.

Turns out people had not gone up into the top of these trees because the lowest branches were 200 feet off the ground. And so he wants to do what's called canopy work.

No one had touched it until 1996. What he comes and finds when he climbs 200 feet up is something incredibly surprising. there are limbs on this tree that are themselves the size of trees. And on top of those limbs there are three feet of soil. There is a whole world living 200 feet off the ground.

He finds huckleberry bushes with fruit that he can eat and there are salamanders that live 200 feet off the ground in these trees. In fact, they tell us some salamanders may live and die in a single tree without ever touching the ground.

[32 : 39] There's a whole other world living in the canopy of these trees 200 feet off the ground. In other words, this tree, just like the kingdom, provides life to surprising candidates.

This tree, just like the kingdom, provides shelter and protection for all sorts of creatures.

Our greatest illustration of all of moving from the small to the great is the cross. We've seen before that the crucifixion is the smallest thing, the most shameful thing, and it leads to Jesus' glorification, the greatest thing, the most glorious thing.

Again, from Philippians chapter 2. At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Our passage tells us some simple things. the kingdom of God has a beginning and it's small and foolish and unexpected. The kingdom of God has an end and it's the greatest and the most powerful.

[34 : 09] And unlike other great and powerful kingdoms, it is loving and benevolent. It provides shelter for anyone who will come and find it.

the photographer I mentioned at the beginning, Nichols, said this as he's searching this most impressive photograph that will finally help people to understand the greatness of the redwood tree. At the end of the day, all I'm after is the glory of this tree. And the forest ecologist Steve Sillett says this, if you're lucky enough to get up into the crowns of one of these trees, it puts your own insignificant existence in perspective.

It makes you realize there's something much greater than yourself, so much vaster than you.

Brothers and sisters, there is something so much greater and so much vaster than us.

It is the kingdom of God. God may look small now, but it will prevail and be the greatest one day.

[35 : 24] It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for this encouragement from your word, this reminder of your kingdom that is to come. We ask that you would be at work in our hearts, that we would embrace and love the foolishness, the weakness of the gospel, that it would be our power, and you'd give us the hope that comes from looking forward to your kingdom when it comes in fullness.

We ask all these things in the mighty name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.