

The Meaningful in the Meaningless
[Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8; Mark 4:30-32]
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Brian Russo

Several years ago, before my brother's garden was mistaken for weeds and cleared out by our landscaper, I asked him what in particular he wanted to grow. Well, he showed me all types of seeds for various types of fruits and vegetables: tomatoes, cucumbers, butter-nut squash, you name it. He even had seeds for a certain exotic South American pepper – one of which, upon being fully grown, he happily served me *before its pickling* and just about set fire to my mouth. Brothers will be brothers... I imagine though, that in all of his times propagating, both the fruitful and the fruitless, he never once intended to plant the mustard seed.

For starters, my brother's hands are elephantine and the seed being so miniscule, well, it'd be a miracle if he wouldn't have fumbled it away. Moreover, his garden was rather humble, modest in its dimensions and small in growth potential, all of which conspiring for poor mustard cultivation. For you see, the mustard seed is known to germinate both quickly and efficiently and it simply would have outpaced and outgrown the rest of his seeds. Additionally, mature mustard seed plants frequently turn into tall bushes, monopolizing the sunlight from all of its surroundings; and thus, in course, my brother's beloved little garden would have been overtaken with just that single spice: mustard. His original and principal desires (savoring the finest cucumbers, tomatoes, and squash that God's green Earth could grow), would have become as immaterial as chasing after the wind.

So why then, when we go back to scripture, does Christ make this small yet invasive seed analogous with the Kingdom of God? Well, as I'm sure many of you have already pieced together, the mustard seed in its punitive size represented the humble beginnings of Christ's own ministry; recalling that he was born into a tiny manger in the overlooked, meaningless town of Nazareth. And yet from that singular seed, the world's most meaningful gospel message would unfurl, spreading from town to town and nation to nation, monopolizing the light, reaching farther and further than all other dominions either planted before or after. And that from now until the end of time, everyone would know that the most meaningful of things could come from even the most insignificant of beginnings.

See, rather simple, and a nice little summer sermon for us all.

But actually, this short parable of a small mustard seed isn't quite that simple. For as several commentaries suggest, there's a literary device being employed here that has been generally overlooked by preachers and casual students alike. You see, the word "sown" is used twice within the span of two sentences (verses 31-32) just as the illustrations of earth and ground are repeated in similar frequency. Now, I admit, that's not exactly Shakespeare, but in the world of Biblical stylistics, repetition is nearly always important. Accordingly, Mark is saying that Jesus' parable is also about the transformative power of the Earth itself; that the mustard seed is meaningless both in symbolism and practicality if it is not first sown into the ground; if it is not made one with the Earth. That the only way the mustard seed, that tiny little speck of our faith, can achieve any such growth is if it is first a part of the world.

Just the same, our Ecclesiastical text teaches us that our faith, indeed our life, is only meaningful if it is wedded to the world and all that it produces in happiness and pleasure, in sorrow and sickness. Life is

not lived authentically if we are only having an affair with Heaven. Rather, life is genuine only if spiritual integrity *and* secular desires come together in fidelity.

Often though, we as Presbyterians have a problem adopting that outlook. Either we funnel all of our energy into the highest theological realm halting ourselves from embracing lower worldly pleasures, or we are so overcome with guilt for enjoying a little too much of the latter and a little too little of the former that our spirituality actually takes on paralysis. If only then we listened to the advice from wise-ages-past, we'd know that having a balance of each, the spiritual and the secular, actually embodies a truer faithfulness.

Look at verses 4 and 6 from chapter 11 (Ecclesiastes):

"Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap... In the morning sow your seed, and at the evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good."

Solomon, Qohelet, or whoever composed Ecclesiastes is telling us, don't just focus your attention northward to the clouds, to God's realm, and don't just sit around waiting for the wind of the Holy Spirit to guide you, but get up and go to work at your life. Experience it. Don't be a miserable, boring, pious sod, locked away in your ivory tower making sure that you never commit any wrongs, safe from the outside world and the temptations it offers. But actively live and prosper (like Spock) harvesting the fruits that come from the ground level of God's creation.

Consider also verse 9:

*"Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but*know that for all these things God will bring you Into judgment."*

Rejoice! And let your heart cheer you, following the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes! See, whoever said that religion takes more off the table than it brings is here proven wrong! For this canonical, authoritative text is urging us to be human, to embrace the pleasures of our senses, and more, that that is how we are to be eternally judged. You see, while many translations read "*but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment,*" just as many read "*and know...*" suggesting that God will hold each of us accountable to the **ethic of joy**. This is exciting, liberating, exegetical stuff! So when we meet Peter at the pearly gates, will we be able to say that we actively enjoyed the fruit of God's original intent – sowing our seeds in the garden of life – or will we confess that we were instead suspicious of that joy, choosing to exist in a vegetative state waiting on the after-life?

Now, does all of that mean that morality is simply to be tossed into the bin? Absolutely not. For the theme woven throughout Ecclesiastes is clear: while we can gleam both meaning and joy from the vanities of our life, they will in the end not entirely sustain. Rather, they will become more like vapor, and will be wisped away when our bodies and minds are too tired to relish in them. The only sustaining power then, from beginning to end, is the presence and adherence to the Kingdom of God. Remember your creator, Ecclesiastes urges us (12:1), the mysterious, majestic creator who gave us this diverse world to be experienced. Remember your savior, the epistles urge us, who died on a cross so that we

could inherit life. And do not cheapen nor limit the grace and mercy in such a gift. Do not take it for granted, squandering it away completely on finite, immediate gratifications. But also, do not be fooled into thinking that gratification and worship are mutually exclusive. For fun, yes, even **fun** can be had and life can be maximized as a faithful believer.

Now admittedly, a conjecture could be made that this sermon is only useful for people like us – those of means, freedom and comfort. That for someone caught in a civil war in Africa, or in famine in India, well, how could they feel that God has given them any such gift? How could their lives be maximized and gratification reimbursed from the vanities of life, when their daily routine is rooted in the basest need for survival? Big question.

Well, let me tell you that on my first mission trip as a youth, I flew to the Dominican Republic with such a question. And when I left back home for New Jersey, I had the most astonishing of answers – an answer that cannot be generalized, but a powerful answer nevertheless – for everyone who we worked with had a far superior ethic of joy than any of us who came from the land of the privileged.

I can still remember one such conversation with a young bright man named, Ariel Paulino, who said to me (in rather fluent English) when we were up late one evening and got into this big question: “why shouldn’t I be happy; sure food is difficult to come by and my home is a cement brick, but still I am alive. And thanks be to God, my creator, because I can feel his sun on my face, the taste of his corn in my mouth, the feel of his earth on my toes... I even turn one of his old milk-cartons into a baseball glove. I’ve got everything I could want.” Any day could have been his end, he went on to say, but that only made every day that he was breathing that much more significant. He cherished all that he had, no matter how little it could be said that it was, and he made sure that all of his days were spent in as much happiness as possible.

My friends, that is Ecclesiastes 11 and 12.

Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with rain, let us cherish and enjoy and harvest all that we can from the world that is ever being created around us. Let the gardens of our lives be so big, that in one corner we have the seeds of our ambitions, and in another the seeds of our vanities, and in the middle the mustard seed of our faith. And let our gardens be so large so that when that middle plant turns into a bush and outgrows the rest of our pleasures in both meaning and purpose, it yet does not monopolize completely the light of our passions and the desires of our eyes.

May our faiths and our lives ever discover the joy in their harmony, for God is holding us accountable to achieve just that.

Amen.