

The headline read “110 teachers laid off in the Reading School District.” Follow up headlines spoke of schools closing, support staff and secretaries being let go. The \$53 million dollar budget deficit is forcing change in the Reading School District.

And they’re not alone: The borough of Mt Penn and Lower Alsace are having a conversation about a possible merger. Antietam School District is exploring a possible merger with Exeter Township.

Meanwhile, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters made headlines a few years ago when the bishop closed a number of churches and merged Central Catholic and Holy Name Schools.

Budgets, budgets everywhere and not a penny to spend! Our society is experiencing major change and the church is not exempt from the pain. Many churches are cutting staff to make ends meet. Our denomination will be considering a budget that features significant staff reductions at the national level and a restructuring that eliminates synods. If that passes, we will eliminate an entire layer of the church.

And then there are our household budgets. I suspect this is a good time to be in the brown bag and lunch box business because we’re all looking for ways to cut back.

Where is God in all of this? Where is hope in the midst of all these changes? Change isn’t necessarily for the better, so how can we respond in faith to these challenges?

We can put some mustard on it, because we’ve got it made in the shade.

“Put some mustard on it!” We say things like that in baseball. I remember cheering on the pitcher on my Little League team (the VFW Braves) by shouting that. We’re asking the pitcher to give it all they’ve got; to reach back for “something extra” to get the strikeout we need. Everything depends on the pitcher’s effort, so don’t hold back. “Put some mustard on it!”

Ironically enough, this spirit of desperation is the direct opposite of the quiet confidence Jesus invites us to enjoy in Mark.

Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee; his topic is the kingdom of God. Everyone understood what the kingdom is – God rules the world, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” They understood what the kingdom is; they didn’t understand how the kingdom would come.

The reign of God was the longing of every Jew’s heart, but there was a very large and very visible obstacle to God’s reign; another empire demanded that it’s will be done on earth; “Caesar is Lord,” and he made sure his will was done in Galilee through the procurator Herod Antipas in his brand new capitol city Tiberias located conveniently on the Sea of Galilee. Roman rule rolled down the Damascus Road that passed by Tiberias and allowed trade and troops to flow from Egypt to Syria.

Roman rule was an ever-present reality in day to day life in Galilee. Folks might long for the reign of God in their heart of hearts, but they lived in fear of Roman law, Roman taxes, Roman legions. How could the kingdom come when Rome had boots on the ground?

[Jesus] said, **“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”**

I can imagine the disciples looking around nervously. Were there any centurions listening in? Would anyone sell them out as traitors – perhaps a tax collector? And Jesus seeks to inspire confidence and hope in them by saying, “Put some mustard on it.”

By which he means, “Relax. We’ve got it made in the shade.”

What the disciples did not understand, what Jesus’ listeners did not understand, what we all-too-often do not understand is that the kingdom of God is not a human achievement. It is not the result of our efforts. It does not depend on our cooperation. The kingdom comes as a gift from God. The kingdom comes through the seed that is Jesus being broken on the cross, buried in the tomb, and blossoming forth to new life. He’s the tiny insignificant mustard seed that is now the greatest of all shrubs; we’ve got it made in his shade.

We’ve got it made, so when fear raises its ugly head, when obstacles arise, when the wrong seems so strong, we put some mustard on it. We remember that this is our Father’s world! God is the ruler yet!

The following classic quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. offers us an example of what this mustard seed confidence looks like:

Cowardice asks the question - is it safe?

Expediency asks the question - is it politic?

Vanity asks the question - is it popular?

But conscience asks the question - is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.<sup>1</sup>

When we put that kind of mustard on the ways of this world, anything is possible!

Anything is possible, so what God gives may not be what we want. It's like the classic lawn care question: Why is it that I cannot get the bare spots in my yard to fill in, and yet there are weeds growing from the crack between the curb and the street?

...-- that's pretty much what Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to. Oh, and that part about the birds seeking refuge. Maybe it's meant as a comforting image -- birds finding shelter from the elements. Or maybe, given the unfavorable reference to birds in the previous parable about the sower -- eating the seed off the path -- it suggests that once mustard shrubs take root, all kinds of things happen including the sudden presence of "undesirables."

Looked at this way, Jesus' parable is a little darker, even ominous. As John Dominic Crossan puts it: *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 (The Historical Jesus, pp. 278-279).*

And ... that's the point: this kingdom Jesus proclaims isn't something we can control. And it's definitely not safe, not, that is, if we're even minimally satisfied with the way things are. Rather, the kingdom comes to overturn, to take over, to transform the kingdoms of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/quote/martin-luther-king-jr-2.html>  
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 Psalm 20 Mark 4:26-34

this world.

But if you're not satisfied, if you can imagine something more than the status quo of scarcity and fear and limited justice and all the rest we're regularly offered, then maybe Jesus saying that God's kingdom is infiltrating the kingdom of the world offers a word of hope, a hope that will entice, prod, or poke you into working toward the vision of the kingdom of God he proclaims. Hope is like that, you see -- it doesn't just cheer you up, it moves you to action.

There's a scene in the recent blockbuster film *The Hunger Games* that gets at the same idea. (It wasn't in the book but fits the story beautifully.) President Snow, the totalitarian ruler of futuristic Panem, asks his chief Games-maker -- the one charged with creating a spectacle as entertaining as it is barbaric -- why they must have a winner. The answer? Hope. He wants to give the oppressed people of Panem hope that maybe, just maybe, the odds will be in their favor and they may win the Hunger Games and escape their life of servitude. "Hope," he explains, "is the only thing more powerful than fear." But for that very reason is as perilous for a dictator as it is useful: "A little hope," he explains, "is effective; a lot of hope is dangerous."

That's what Jesus offers, the dangerous hope that God's kingdom is coming and while we certainly cannot control or even summon it ... we can actively anticipate it by looking for and even aiding its unexpected growth.<sup>2</sup>

God's kingdom is coming. Anything is possible. We've got it made in the shade, so put some mustard on it. Keep an eye out for those places where God's kingdom is sneaking in, or spreading out, or taking over little corners of our world! Be on the lookout for hope, the dangerous hope that changes lives in ways small and large. And when you see these things, step up, scatter your seed, do what you can, and always, always, always ... put some mustard on it. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=597](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=597)  
<sup>1</sup> Samuel 15:34-16:13 Psalm 20 Mark 4:26-34