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Text: Matthew 13:31-32 (Parable of the Mustard Seed)

Focus: God's rule and reign appears small and weak now, but it is still there and a day is coming when it will be fulfilled.

Function: That the hearer would take courage from knowing that God's reign and rule is here today and will be fulfilled in His time.

Structure: Multiple Image

In Jesus Name.

It was one of the highlights of the school year. We were sent home with a Styrofoam cup filled with dirt, with a hole in the bottom, and a seed planted somewhere in the middle. To anyone who grew up on a farm this was probably all silliness or mundane, but for us suburban kids in the third grade it was magical. I'm sure there was some lesson behind it about the photosynthesis process or about the life-cycle of a plant, but for me it meant I was a farmer! And I was going to do great at it. I would water that seed twice a day whether it needed it or not. I would set it in the sun and rotate it as necessary to maximize that photosynthesis. My little seed was going to grow to be the biggest, the tallest, and be the best plant in the class! I couldn't wait to wake up the next day to a tree growing there in that cup by the windowsill.

The first few days I religiously tended to that little seed. I would rush home from school to care for it, sure that something great would spring up from the ground any second. It wasn't happening quite like I had planned, it was taking longer than I would have liked, but I could see in my mind a giant tree bursting forth from that tiny cup of dirt.

But, there that cup of dirt sat. And that's what I began to see it as, just a bunch of dirt. No tree, not even a little sprout. I began to give up hope. While other kids talked about their plants and measured their growth in centimeters I began to think that my plant would never come. Pretty soon I was so hopeless that I became to despise that little cup of dirt. That's all it was. That's all I could see. Dirt.

Isn't it that way in our lives with God sometimes? All we see is the dirt. And in doing so we give up hope. We know the promises of the Bible. Yes, we know that God died and rose again for us. We know that He promises to heal and forgive. We know that He has the power to raise the dead, give sight to the blind, and give voice to the mute. We know that God is working for good in us, His children. We know He promises to never leave us or forsake us. He is the Almighty God who oversees the whole world and holds it in His hands. We know He *says* He's working here among us even today.

And yet, all we can see is the dirt of this world. A friend dies. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She has struggled with sickness for some time. You've

prayed for her more times than you can count. You've held her hand and reminded her about the power of Jesus. You've comforted her, and yourself, with the hope that comes from faith in Christ and His work. And then you've prayed some more. It doesn't look like God is working how you wanted Him to, or in your timing. You've tried to keep your faith but your friend is dead now and all you can see is the dirt of death in this world.

You've done everything you can to overcome that one sin that just won't go away. You've tried it all. But, it's a vicious cycle that never seems to end. You sin, feel guilty, and then indulge again as a way to deal with the pain of guilt. Of course that only brings more guilt. Friends try to comfort you with the peace of God's forgiveness, but surely you don't deserve it. Why doesn't God just take this temptation away from you and NOW? Is it worth it to keep fighting against this sin when God seems so absent? You try to rest in the grace of your Lord, but all you can see is the dirt of sin in your life.

You turn on the news. Seven more shootings overnight in the city. A little girl was abducted. An eight car pileup on the freeway. More wars in the Middle East. The government never seems to get things right. People vote for immoral laws and celebrate sin. More dirt. It seems that that is all there is to this life. What's the point, you think? Why doesn't God do something? Where is He? Does He even care about any of this? It doesn't seem like it. And if He doesn't, why should I? Why should I go on believing, living, or trusting in a God that is never around?

In our Gospel reading for today Jesus tells us a parable. It's about a little, tiny mustard seed. That little tiny seed is what Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to. This catches us off guard. The reign and rule of our God is like a mustard seed? Yep, that's what our Lord says. The kingdom of Heaven – God's kingdom – is like a little, tiny mustard seed planted in the earth. It seems like a problem to have such a big, messed up, dirty world and such a tiny kingdom and rule of God. We don't want a tiny seed kingdom, but a mighty powerful tree kingdom and we want it now! Doesn't God see all the dirt that's around us?

But, the problem isn't with the seed – with God's reign and rule in this world. It's not that the seed of God's kingdom is too small. It's not that He isn't here, working, ruling, watching over all of us. It's that we all too often miss it because we're looking at the dirt. The sin, the sickness, the death, and the brokenness of this world. But God is here. Working. Ruling. Reigning. He might not be working on our time, or in the ways we are looking for, but He is here working amidst the dirt.

Two-thousand years ago God came here to this world. To this broken world filled with dirt. He came to a hill called Calvary. Many of the people there only saw the dirt of that place of execution. They only saw the blood pouring from His side and saw defeat. They only saw a helpless man hanging limp on a tree. They only saw the death of a man who claimed to be God. None of us would have expected the

Almighty God to work in such a humble, dirty way. But in that place, here in this world, God was working His redemption and forgiveness for the whole world.

God's working in this world is so often like that. It easily gets buried in the dirt of our lives and becomes invisible. Yet, God calls us to remember that He is here. Working for you. And so we cling to that promise as Satan tries to tell us that God is absent. Satan would rather have you give up. Call it quits. To focus on the dirt of this world so that you would despair. He wants you to forget about that little seed planted in the dirt. He wants you to give up hope that God is working for you.

But, God has not left us here alone in our dirty world today. It's not that His work stopped that day on the cross or when He left the empty tomb. No, Jesus is working, ruling, and reigning here in this world. It's just that God's kingdom doesn't look like we want it to, or like we'd ever expect it to. God's kingdom looks more like a refugee camp or hospital ward than it does the White House or Buckingham palace. His Kingdom is defined by a manger and a cross, not by an army or a bank account with billions.

And so my encouragement to you today is this: The seed is there. And there is a day coming when that little seed - when God's reign and rule in this world, His kingdom, will come into its fullness. God tells us so in today's parable. Jesus tells us that when the little mustard seed grows up it is larger than any of the other garden plants, and that the birds will come to nest in its branches. There is a time coming when God's kingdom, His reign and rule, will come to full fruition. Jesus' coming again will be more perfect and glorious than anything we can imagine. It will mean no more pain or suffering. No more guilt or worry. No more death and temptation. All of that wiped out forever. It will mean families reunited and people worshiping together from every tribe and tongue. It will mean no more school shootings, guilty binges into sin, and loved ones lying in caskets. It will mean all of us who have ever trusted in Jesus being raised up from the dirt to spend an eternity with our Savior. It will mean no more dirt.

So, brothers and sisters, remember that the seed is there. Remember that God's Kingdom is here. It's here in Bread and Wine at this altar. You'll experience God's Kingdom - His reign and Rule in just a minute. It's in the simple waters of Baptism where God is working to wash and renew and forgive. It's in His Word, where He promises things you don't find anywhere else like love and mercy and grace. It's found in Jesus. The one who got dirty so that you would forever and always experience and live in God's Kingdom.

In Jesus Name, Amen.