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Have you ever had one of those days when something before you seems so overwhelming that it's hard to get started?

Maybe it's a home improvement remodeling project that has so many steps to accomplish that you can't figure out where to begin.

Or maybe the annual tax forms waiting to be filled out seem to pile higher each day.

Or when the doctor gives you a report of your medical test results, the choices you face seem too complicated to decide the best option.

Those who have lost a loved one to death may feel as though each day is a struggle to get through, wondering how to start feeling better.

For some, the overwhelming feelings of depression can make any task too complicated, even the basic steps of making everyday decisions. What seems like a small step to those around them seems like a huge obstacle to the one depressed, creating a dilemma on how to get started.

It's on these days that I find Jesus' parables about mustard seeds and yeast helpful, things that

begin small but can surprise us. Before he told about these two particular things, Jesus began teaching a crowd about a farmer planting seeds. You've probably heard it before: Some seeds were eaten by birds, others fell on rocky ground and couldn't take root and dried up, some fell among thorn bushes and were choked out, and a few actually grew.

Jesus then told a story about a farmer who planted good, healthy seeds in his field, but in the middle of the night someone came and spread weed seeds in the same ground.

Have you felt as though your efforts have been hampered, like birds eating up the seeds you've planted? Or has your mind ever been so overwhelmed that it felt as though you were snagged in thorn bushes or tangled in weeds that somehow mysteriously appeared overnight?

That's what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus suggested: seeds that grow and those that don't. Wait a minute. Thorn bushes? Weeds? What? Isn't the kingdom of God supposed to be glorious and

wonderful? But like seeds that don't grow? What's up with that, Jesus? I imagine the crowd wondering about the same questions: What did he say the kingdom of heaven is like? Our lives are already a tangled mess. Why speak of more tangledness, Jesus?

I think Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is already among us, even in the midst of our difficult and tangled lives. The kingdom of heaven is not just something that happens later when the world has been made right, but it's already growing among us now, even in the midst of thorns, weeds, and the rocky paths of our lives.

But before we get too discouraged, Jesus offers us the imagery of a mustard seed, something so small it seems insignificant. The seed measures only a few millimeters in size, and yet, it can grow into a bush that's six to 20 feet tall! "Start small," Jesus seems to suggest, "and wait to see what happens." Even in the complications of your life, taking a small step can take you toward hope as you grow through the turmoil.

Other religious teachers have referred to the mustard seed in their teachings as well.

The earliest reference to mustard is in India from a story of Gautama Buddha in the fifth century BC. Gautama Buddha told the story of the grieving mother...and the mustard seed. When a mother loses her only son, she takes his body to the Buddha to find a cure. The Buddha asks her to bring a handful of mustard seeds from a family that has never lost a child, husband, parent, or friend. When the mother is unable to find such a house in her village, she realizes death is common to all.<sup>1</sup>

The mustard seed, in this case, reminds that we're not alone in our struggles, that we share our grief in common with all of humanity. When you're tempted to ask, "Why me, God? Why do I have to suffer?" the mustard seed reminds us that it's not just you—suffering is common to all humanity.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero was an early leader in the religious 16<sup>th</sup>-century branch of Judaism known as Kabbalah, which explores the mystical and spiritual aspects of faith. After writing about the vastness of God, he referred to the mustard seed:

[In relation to God] Then you wonder, astonished: Who am I? I am a mustard seed in the middle of the sphere of the moon, which itself is a mustard seed within the next sphere. So it is with that sphere and all it contains in relation to the next sphere. So it is with all the spheres — one inside the other — and all of them are a mustard seed within the further expanses. And all of these are a mustard seed within further expanses.<sup>2</sup>

This rabbi reminds me that no matter how big your problem may seem to be, in the vastness of the universe, you're just a tiny mustard seed. And yet, no problem is ever too small for God to ignore. Isn't that amazing? In the vastness of the universe, God senses what you're going through, for when God came to earth through the life of Jesus, God became even more aware of the struggles of life, as in the case of Mrs. Trinidad in Puerto Rico.

Everyone in the area knows Maria Trinidad...For years they have come to her home at the top of a hill in Ciales, Puerto Rico, for school uniforms and party dresses, for trouser hems and alterations. Mrs. Trinidad could look out the window above her sewing machine and see the whole neighborhood. For over four decades, she has looked out over the place she calls home as she has created clothes for her neighbors.

In September of 2017, Mrs. Trinidad's home was destroyed. When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, Mrs. Trinidad took shelter with her sister in the back room of the house—the only part of the structure made of concrete—as the wind and rain howled through the hills. After the storm, the two women found the rest of the house in ruins. Debris was strewn everywhere. Yet, in the middle of the fractured rafters and twisted roofing stood a table and on it, Mrs. Trinidad's sewing machine...

Though she received financial assistance from federal programs, the funds would not cover the cost of the extensive repairs. Mrs. Trinidad did not know what else to do when a neighbor referred her to the local Disciples congregation. Disciples leaders soon met with Mrs. Trinidad and began coordinating resources and volunteers to rebuild her home so she can get back to the sewing she loves.<sup>3</sup>

It's through the small seeds of our Week of Compassion gifts that we've been able to help her recover, for the tiny seeds have grown into hope and a chance to begin her life again.

Sometimes when we look at the mustard seeds in our lives, we get impatient. We want things to happen right now. We're sometimes too hard on ourselves that growth doesn't happen fast enough. We may even get frustrated with church, wanting things to happen right away, wanting it to grow to the size it's been in years past.

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I once had a conversation with a pastor of another congregation who was frustrated with his church. He said, “My members don’t seem to be doing enough for Jesus. They don’t always come to church on Sunday. But even when they do, I don’t think it makes much difference in their lives. They need to be making disciples, getting others to follow Jesus.”

I replied, “I think the folks in my church are doing the best they can, for they live busy and fragmented lives. Rather than complaining when they aren’t in church, I celebrate when they are. I think they are living out Jesus’ teachings as they go about their lives striving to be the best they can. I trust that God works through them to reflect God’s love even when they struggle.”

My friend replied, “That’s a grace-filled view of church. I like that.”

Sometimes we have to start small, like a mustard seed buried in the dirt. With God’s care and grace and our patience and efforts, amazing things can sprout forth. Like a tiny seed planted in the earth. Like a woman who puts yeast in the bread, mixes it with flour, and bakes the mixture into a tasty loaf of bread. Start small. Wait. Smell the fragrance of baking bread. Watch the tiny sprouts of seeds growing. Celebrate what God is already doing to bring forth newness and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard\\_seed#cite\\_note-5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_seed#cite_note-5)

<sup>2</sup> <https://learnkabbalah.com/the-meaning-of-god/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.weekofcompassion.org/our-impact/2019/1/22/mrs-trinidad-seamstress-survivor>