

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • OCTOBER 11, 2020**  
***“WIDE-OPEN SPACES”***

**Song of Focus**  
***“Like a Mustard Seed”***  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

1. Is bigger better: impressive and great?  
It can capture attention so all else must wait,  
while ignoring a seed, so tiny a thing,  
with brimming potential past imagining.

*Refrain:*

Like a mustard seed, so small when it's sown,  
nourished by soil to be great when full grown,  
there's amazing potential when vision is placed  
in a work to God's glory, new life in God's grace.

2. Potential takes root when one dares to sow  
that tiniest seed from which roots will grow.  
Then, shoots break the ground and new life takes form,  
preparing to bloom with beauty newborn.

*Refrain:*

Like a mustard seed, so small when it's sown,  
nourished by soil to be great when full grown,  
there's amazing potential when vision is placed  
in a work to God's glory, new life in God's grace.

**The Scripture**  
**Matthew 13:31-32**

*He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

**The Message**  
***Wide-Open Spaces: When You Reach the End of Netflix***  
**Mark Briley**



Netflix is among the companies booming during the pandemic. Many people are home, and ten bucks a month has opened up many kingdoms: worlds of tiger kings, last dances, and some touristy show about the Ozarks. I admit to running down a Netflix



rabbit hole or two. I was enthralled in *The Last Dance* series – a walk with Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls through that tumultuous final championship season. It was like re-living my childhood. MJ was king! I remember sitting in my social studies class at Macon High School the morning of the announcement of Jordan’s first retirement from the NBA. His biggest fan was a

classmate of mine, and she had yet to hear the news. So, when it was said aloud in class... she halted any social study being taught by Mr. Belt, stood up, and with a loud shriek, she began to cry. It was dramatic; but, if I’m honest, I remember the feelings. And I felt some of them again watching the series this summer.



My other Netflix rabbit role I chased was another childhood throw back. Maybe the pandemic has made me nostalgic. I watched the entirety of the *Cobra Kai* series – a look at Daniel LaRusso and his karate rival Johnny Lawrence some 30- plus years after the events

of the 1984 All Valley Karate tournament. Was it like watching a *Saved by the Bell* “Where are they now?” series – absolutely – did I love every minute? I’m afraid I did. They’ve renewed for two more seasons, so if you’re interested in considering the theological implications of the *Cobra Kai* series, I may or may not be willing to create such a study.



You've likely got some favorites, too. My family loved "*Anne with an E*", a sort of Little-House-on-the-Prairie-vibed show. I see folks asking for recommendations via social media saying, "*I've just finished this series or that series... what should I watch next.*"

I shared earlier this summer that someone said, "*I finished Netflix.*" "*You mean a series?*" "*Nope... I mean **all** of Netflix.*" The watching certainly created some fleeting moments of joy or wonder or adventure to be sure. But what happens when you get to the end of Netflix? What's left? Maybe the next Netflix search is about a deeper kingdom yet... one that might seem small at first but is waiting to bloom into something more... something real... something transformative. It starts with a wonder, a thought, a seed in a wide-open space.

Jesus was big on seeds. Talked about them often. A byproduct of an agriculture society, I suppose. I picture him walking the dirt roads with the disciples, ripping open a fresh bag of "*David*" sunflower seeds – Old Bay Seasoned – and chewing on them and spitting out the shells as they walk, especially during this stretch of Matthew's telling of the Good News. Jesus is in the thick of it... when is he not; right? He's teaching and healing and challenging the religious folks. The Pharisees, with their fancy degrees framed on their office walls and their cigar -room discussions about bylaw item 5.427 weren't having this renegade approach to religion. They started slinging like a bad campaign attack ad: "*Everything he's doing is the Devil's work. Can't trust him.*"

Jesus said, "*A house divided, crumbles.*" Do we know this truth, friends? This was Jesus' deal at the time. He was healing people and getting chastised for that, too – helping people on the Sabbath and all. And he was teaching like nobody's business – in person, virtual, Schoology, on a boat, via goat yoga. He was everywhere. On fire! And many a parable in this stretch – stories of what the realm of God is like. How else could we really comprehend, right? So, he tells stories and gives glimpses. The kingdom is sort of like this... it's also kind of like this... it's like baking bread and finding quarters in the couch cushions; you know? It's like Patrick Mahomes on a third and long. "*How else can I say this?*" He looks at the handful of seeds in his hand. "*Seeds. Let's go with seeds.*"

The disciples lean in... because they know they get the Director's Cut version of every Jesus story and he says, "*Hey... it's like... a mustard seed.*" "*Okay... okay... mustard seed... cool, cool, cool. Now, what about the mustard seed?*" "*Calm down,*" Jesus says, "*It's like a mustard seed that a farmer takes out into the widest-open space she can find. She places it in a hole, steps back, and smiles.*" "*Why is she smiling, Jesus?*"

*“Because **she knows** something about that seed. She knows that tiny seed will grow into the grandest tree in the field, inviting every creature to enjoy it.”* And then Jesus quipped another parable. His storytelling fulfilled the prophecy that said, *“I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the wide-open spaces things hidden since the world’s first day.”*

And here we are talking about mustard seeds in 2020. What I love about that story... is that *“**she knows**”* part. She knows it’s a tiny seed, it doesn’t make much sense in this moment... but it’s only the beginning. The greater vision is in the wide-open space that she’s begun to see in her spirit. *“She knows.”*

What do you know? I mean... what do you really *know*, you know what I mean? There’s a spirit part of you that knows the things that this material world can’t ever know. Madonna named it – *“I’m a material girl living in a material world.”* I live in a world where I push a lawnmower to cut the growing grass, as I listen to some leadership podcast. I live in a world where I must stand in line at the DMV to get material tags to put on my license plate nicely framed with a *“Catch the Broadway Spirit”* license plate holder. I live in a material world where I wait in line at drive-thrus and use my *“My Time”* card at Break Time to gain reward points. Coincidentally, can I just say that when you think, *“I’m just gonna get gas in the morning,”* you need to know that is one of the worst decisions you will make as an adult. This is the material world we live in.

But there’s another world. *“She knows.”* You know. It surely exists. It’s one of mustard seeds, and baking bread, finding coins... and yet it’s none of those things at all. It’s a glimpse of the spiritual realm. Helen Keller said, *“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched; they must be felt with your heart.”* *“She knows.”*

The Apostle Paul said, *“Fix your eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.”* Jesus said, *“Seek first my kingdom,”* which was another way of saying, *“Don’t be absorbed by your material world.”* But the confines of the material world is such a narrow space. Remember Psalm 118:5 from last week ... still working on me: *“I called out to God from my narrow space and God answered me from the expanse.”* *“She knows something about that seed... from the smallness, greatness.”*

I’m not sure if you can watch the movie *The Matrix* on Netflix, but it was a thinker back in the day. Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne was the God figure who caught the attention of Neo played by Keanu Reeves (*who was coincidentally Ted from Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure or this year’s Bill & Ted Face the Music* neither which won an Oscar but...). Neo ends up in this unfamiliar space with Morpheus and it’s quite the serious talk. Morpheus says, *“Feel a bit like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole?”* *“You*



*could say that,” Neo says. “Let me tell you why you’re here, Neo. You’re here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain, but you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life, that there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is, but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.”<sup>1</sup>*

*It’s what she knows about the mustard seed. It’s what Neo knows about this world... there’s something bigger brewing. There’s a wider space that we haven’t yet explored. Don’t you have this ache? Like a splinter in your soul? You know something... like a peace you can’t quite find... or a truth you can’t quite crack... or*

*an accepting love that has eluded your heart to this point in life. You’ve sought it in the material world... we all have in some way... but it’s just not findable on Amazon. But you want to see. We long to see... to know. That’s why we’re here now, right? Partly tradition, I suppose. Partly habit or obligation or just the pre-cursor to your favorite Sunday dinner. But somewhere... in the depths... there is a splinter in your mind today, and you’re seeking to know ... and so am I.*

*Neo asks Morpheus, “Why do my eyes hurt?” Morpheus says, “You’ve never used them before. Neo, sooner or later you’re going to realize just as I did that there’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”*

*What if we could see? It’s why Jesus had a parable for every material object... something that we could see in hopes of seeing what we cannot. Much of the time, however, we forget to *look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now.* Much of the time, we don’t even know we’re lost.*

*I got a good chuckle out of a news story I saw for the first time this week, even though it happened a few years back.<sup>2</sup> Talk about not knowing you are lost. The headline read, “‘Missing’ Woman Mystery Solved.” A group of tourists spent hours Saturday night looking for a missing woman near Iceland’s Eldgja Canyon, only to find her among the search party. The group was traveling through Iceland on a tour bus and stopped near a volcanic canyon. Soon, there was word of a missing passenger. The woman, who had changed clothes, didn’t recognize the description of herself, and joined in the*

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<sup>1</sup> The Matrix reference comes from Jim Palmer’s “Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity”. Thomas Nelson publishing. 2007. Palmer’s work inspired this series and this message specifically from Chapter Nine: *Follow the White Rabbit*.

<sup>2</sup> A friend on Face Book posted this news clipping. I am not certain of its original source.

*search. But the search was called off at about 3 a.m. when it became clear the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself.*” Isn’t that awesome? I mean not for the woman. And not at the time. And not for the many searching for her until 3 in the morning. But... in hindsight. And we all know hindsight is... 2020. Doesn’t that take on new meaning these days? *The search was called off when the missing woman was accounted for and realized she was searching for herself.* And we get it.

It’s hard to go into the wide-open space of this world, looking for a tree in the open field when it’s still a seed in the ground. It’s hard to see what your life can be yet when you’re bogged down in the mire of the moment. It’s hard to find ourselves when we don’t even realize we are the ones being sought. It’s hard to see the kingdom of God that Jesus promised is right here, right now among us when it seems all is falling apart. But there’s that pesky splinter in the mind, right, in the soul... that knows. *“She knows the seed’s potential.”* You know something’s not yet right or complete or whole and so here you are, wondering with us collectively what all the mess of this life can mean.

Paul called his splinter a thorn. So much speculation about the thorn in the side of *the* Apostle Paul. Don’t you think he said it like that... like the Ohio State university. *The* Apostle Paul had a thorn in his side. It plagued him throughout his life... and we’re talking about a guy, who had been snake bitten, shipwrecked, beaten mercilessly, imprisoned and more. He’s got this thorn that he says, *“I prayed three times for God to remove it from me.”* And we’re not talking about a throw-in prayer request on a random Monday, Tuesday and Thursday of some week one summer... not a *“By the way, God, that thorn is a bother, could you tweeze it out for me?”* No... I imagine three painful seasons of pleading. *“God, I’m not sure I can keep doing this ministry stuff. I’m not sure I’ve got the energy to do what is needed. I’m not sure I can keep going in the face of adversity, in the hatred, in the mockery... with the thorn.”*

You’ve been there... you may be there now... we are pretty much there as a society. You’re leaned back in a lawn chair, looking at your handful of mustard seeds and you’re like, *“Ain’t happening.”* Can’t see it. Can’t be it. But in spite of the seeming impossibility... that farmer? She knows about the seed.

Paul knows the thorn won’t win. And you know, too. If there’s a gift of this season, this may be it. We’re in a mustard seed season. We’re watching this from home or sitting on the lawn, and we’ve cut through much of the allure of the material world... which some say are just distractions from the seed work that needed to happen inside of us.

A minister friend of mine offered such a seed opportunity to the church right now. *“Church,”* he said, *“don’t be overly-hooked by the big show. I love aesthetics, too. I appreciate good music, beautiful lights, and well-placed props. But at the end of the day, if we are the Body of Christ, we are following a single man from Nazareth, with dirty feet and blood-stained hands, who invites us to a simple meal.”*

While we've been longing for the old days, Jesus is popping in another mouthful of seeds and pointing to the wide-open space saying, "*Over there... it's rising, even if you can't see it yet.*" Don't go back to what was but press forward to what we can become.

What does this mean for us, Broadway? I think it means we scatter some new seed and keep growing. Patient waiting is a virtue, and it is often called for and yet... if the seed never makes it from our pocket to the ground, it won't grow at all. Bob Goff says it like this: "*I've met a lot of people who say they're waiting for God to give them a "plan" for their lives. They talk about this "plan" like it's a treasure map folded up in God's back pocket. Only pirates have those,*" he says. "*People who want a reason to delay often wait for plans.*"

So, we just start another series on Netflix and run down another rabbit hole or two while we wait. But then Bob says, "*People who are becoming love don't do that.*" They have a splinter in their soul that knows... something's brewing, growing, and we can be part of it now. It's not a mustard seed one moment and a spread on your brat the next... but the ache will help you know if you're working toward the ultimate knowing or not. I've spun plenty a wheel that I knew in my heart wasn't propelling the movement toward the towering tree. If you've ever put in the time out of duty and not passion, you know this stalling. If you're tired of faking it, you're finally in a position to grow. God is more interested in our growth than us looking like a finished product.

So what is it that you *know* in your heart right now? What do you know about the mustard seeds in your life? What are you planting now that you're fully committed to? You may not see it all yet... it may just be an email in the inbox or an investment in a child. Maybe the tree of your planted seed is yet to bring the shade of someday, but you can see it even now. You can walk along your current path with Jesus, chewing seeds, seeing that... "*she knows.*" That splinter in your soul is pointing you to the deeper seeking that has you braving the next steps. You *know* that you *know* that you *know* that God is going to work some growth into your life through this seed. I trust it. I'm in it with you. When you come to the end of Netflix, there's something more. And this is the season to know it... to trust it... to grow it... to become it. Thanks be to God!