

The Mustard Seed

Micah 5:2-5a

Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19

October 27, 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

Three different versions of the same parable, with differences among them. The mustard seed, sowed in the field, sown upon the ground, sowed in a garden. It becomes the greatest of shrubs that becomes a tree, the greatest of all shrubs, a tree. And the birds of the air make nests in its branches, or in its shade, or in its branches. The mustard seed isn't actually the smallest of all seeds. And the greatest of all shrubs doesn't really sound very impressive, which is probably why some of the gospel writers decided to say "tree" instead.

But Jesus is making a point. We'll talk about some of the particulars later in Bible Study, and they're interesting. About seeds and laws and how this parable has been interpreted dangerously and used wrongly. But the author skips past a major point of the parable several times, both in the study guide and the big book and the video. She allows that a major point is that something small becomes something big. And then she says something like, "but that isn't very interesting," or "that isn't very provocative or troubling," and so it isn't all that the parable wants to say to us. I agree that it isn't the complete message of the parable, that something small grows into something big. But I completely disagree that that message isn't provocative or troubling or interesting.

The message that something small can become something big, or have impact out of proportion its size, is a thoroughly biblical message. It goes along with God tending to choose the unlikely younger brothers of families. Our reading from the prophet Micah, and the reason we're singing a Christmas carol in October, is a part of this theme that runs through all of Scripture. God chooses the little town of Bethlehem, from the little clans that had never been chosen for a special role before. In Bethlehem, that's where the messiah will be born, one who will rule in Israel. And by the way, not in Micah, but that Messiah, one who will rule in Israel in a completely different way than Micah thought, that Messiah will come as a little baby in a manger. A tiny baby in a tiny town, not a mighty ruler in big important Jerusalem. But that something little eventually becomes something big, the savior of the world.

Our culture tends to make two characteristics equal that are not equal. Our culture tends to make *small* equal with *insignificant* or *unimportant*. And the

parable of the mustard seed loudly and clearly proclaims that this is not true. And I think that message is worth listening to, as interesting and provocative and even troubling.

When our culture says that small towns don't deserve the resources or health care or schools that big cities or suburbs do, the mustard seed says, not so fast. That little town is significant, important. And that little town might be raising someone who will become crucial to the future of our world.

When our culture says that children aren't important because they're young—and we do say this in a thousand ways, but one measure is how little we pay childcare workers and teachers—the mustard seed says, oh no you don't. Those small people are important, precious, honored. And those small people will grow into big people, and you need them to have the best start and foundation possible.

And when our world says, everybody important goes to big churches, and big church pastors are the ones whose words matter, and little congregations are all going to be gone in ten years anyway, the mustard seed says, not so fast. Those little churches, our little churches, God's little churches, are precisely where faith is alive and lively and living.

Not that big churches can't be faithful or do faithful ministry, but small churches are the ones that tend to get overlooked or discounted.

Just lately, I've seen a lot of essays and articles and write-ups about small churches: how they are valuable, and ministries they are carrying out. Most of these I'm going to share with you have come across my virtual desk in the past couple months. I thought we could use a little inspiration, inspiration that might grow like the mustard seed, into something disproportionately big. And that isn't uninteresting, or unprovocative. And though our study book author thinks that message is not troubling, I find it troubling that our culture and society and world can't seem to get the message, can't seem to understand and value and learn from small people and small group and small things. It's worth repeating, just for that reason.

This first article was written by Kristin Stroble, a pastor in Ohio. It appeared in the Presbyterian Outlook in the September, 2016 issue, but I just saw it a couple months ago. She writes: "There are days that I too get caught up in what we lack. I dream of what we could do with more money. I wonder how we would be different if we had more people. I'd like to not always be the youngest in the room. We so often focus on our deficits. We too easily get stuck in what we don't have. Here are the gifts that my small church offers: I see a church full of people

who deeply love each other and seek ways to show that love. I see church dinners overflowing with homemade casseroles. The act of cooking for another and sharing meals together is one of the more intimate ways we express hospitality and Christian fellowship. I see a church that during the passing of the peace truly makes sure they greet as many people as possible, especially the person they don't know. I see a mission committee that wants to serve the children in our community through outreach events, even if they don't come back for worship. I see faithful people with questions and fears and doubts, who gather each week for Bible study because they want to learn together and deepen their relationships with each other and God. I see a church that more than anything wants to love and be loved in return.

I think we need to value our small churches. After all, the church began as small house communities – intimate groups who shared meals, resources and lives together. In a culture that is crying out for connection and community, small churches are a gift that is greatly needed. The church is one of the few places left where intergenerational communities gather together.”

The next one was also in the Presbyterian Outlook, this time in the October 2 edition this year. It's specifically about ministry with children and youth in small congregations and is written by Rebecca Gresham-Kesner, a minister in New Jersey. She wraps up after sharing about the kids in her congregation with this: All of these amazing things are examples of how the church is a community. The kind of community Jesus calls us into to love and care for one another. It is a community that encourages learning and exploring faith. It is also a community that is taking very seriously the vows they make every time a person is baptized in our midst. We promise to guide and nurture, in word and deed, with love and prayer. We promise to encourage the newly baptized to know and follow Christ and be a faithful member of his church. I get to see this lived out on the sidelines at soccer, in the pews, the classrooms and at birthday parties for 6-year-olds. I see that beautiful and beloved community growing one relationship at a time. Community, after all, is all about being in relationship together.

And then there were a couple of stories of little churches embarking on ministry on the scale that they could. The first one is a small church in Pennsylvania who didn't have any children, but they had felt called to reach out to kids in their neighborhood. They just didn't know how. Then someone who had worked as a Christian educator in a larger congregation retired and moved to

their church. She offered to help. So they got ready, most of their people volunteered to help, they advertised in all the places and all the ways they thought would work. And no kids came. Zero. The pastor writes, “I made my way to the fellowship hall, where the volunteers were sitting around a table, chatting with one another. I joined them and together we talked about where we saw God working in what we had done so far.

“I told them I saw God at work in the number of people who had volunteered and the fact that we now had people with background checks. I then asked how they felt and what we should do next. We decided to try again the next week.

“On the drive home, I battled my disappointment. Of course, this wasn’t the first time I’d created a program or a class that nobody had attended. But the kids program was the first time that so much expense and so many volunteers had been involved.”

The next week, one little girl came. She had a great time, and so did the volunteers. Over the course of a few weeks, a few more kids came, but never very many. But this is how the pastor concludes: “After our last night together, the adults decided that even though we outnumbered the kids each night, our program was a success.

“God showed us that we were capable of doing children’s ministry and reminded us that wherever two or more are gathered in God’s name, ministry can happen. It doesn’t matter if they are adults or children or a combination of each. It doesn’t matter if it’s one person or 100. God accomplishes what God desires, not what we expect.”¹

Those were all Presbyterians. This last one is a Lutheran church in Minneapolis. Their membership had dwindled and aged, and they only had 18 months’ worth of money left. A new pastor arrived, and stated the obvious: they were dying. So they decided they would die well, and take “love thy neighbor” to the practical extreme. They started doing home repairs for their neighbors, things they couldn’t afford to have fixed. Big stuff: roofs, plumbing, make kitchens

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0919-small/?fbclid=IwAR1Rj41yHpQVK-bDFJCsaxQrU7RejLeuSSqRX3BvPhTYLGCPIXIMqHzQTSXM>

wheelchair accessible, painting. They helped anyone who asked. No strings, at all. No expectation that those they helped would come to church.

Well, people got excited about this. Non-members joined in to help. Other people donated money. Those who had been helped donated what they could. Their membership has increased, but they still don't have any money, since they give it all away. But neighbors pitch in to help when the church building needs a repair. They share tools. They have a community.

And this is how the article concludes: "While the congregation itself remains small, parishioners say hundreds of others consider the church theirs. They may never come to service. They may think God an archaic superstition. Yet they nonetheless feel the pull of kindness."²

I could go on. There are more stories like this to share. They're important. They're provocative—we know they are, because if they weren't provocative, it wouldn't surprise us when they're published. They're troubling, because we as a culture are awfully dense when it comes to learning the lesson of the mustard seed. Little things are important, and have impacts beyond their size. Thanks be to God that this is true.

Results—provides for birds

² http://www.citypages.com/news/peace-lutheran-staved-off-death-by-taking-love-thy-neighbor-to-a-radical-extreme/563648921?fbclid=IwAR12MXS3Dt0YarXJ9_4x2suMcv8mlaEnwjbboIXZf-JF5_9d63OcAJr0cTY