

Enough with Little

(or Getting Small)

Mark 4:26-34

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (June 16) 2024

Kyle Childress

Back during my college days, the comedian Steve Martin had a stand-up routine called, “Let’s get small.” The whole thing was a play on “getting high” as in getting high on some kind of drug. He said that once he was driving when he was pulled over by a cop who asked, “Are you small?” He responded, “No, I’m tall!” The cop said, “We have to test you. Take this balloon and see if you can get inside of it. If you get inside, you’re small.” Martin said, when they put you in jail for being small, they must be careful because when you’re small you can walk right out.”

Over the years, I’ve come to realize that I’ve been called to get small – without the drugs! For all my 43 years of ordained ministry, I have served small congregations. When I was young, I figured like most every young minister, I would eventually end up in a gloriously large congregation. But over time in countless small acts of ministry in the midst of a small congregation, I’ve been changed. I’ve become smaller.

The Anglo-Welsh poet and pastor, R.S. Thomas, who died in 2000, said in one of his poems, “I’ve been vicar of large things in a small parish.” His entire ministry was in tiny, rural Welsh churches – he once said he preached to three elderly women and a sack of cantaloupes – where he ministered the large things of God, of life and death, salvation and hope, and love and grace. Thomas, along with

poet/pastors like George Herbert and Chaucer's Parson, came to know that the large things of God happen in small ways, in humble places. And if you want to know them, you must become small, too.

I believe God's calling us all is to get small.

In our reading today, Jesus talks about small things. As usual, Jesus is telling us that God's kingdom is counter to our ways of thinking. It's not what we expect. He tells his disciples they are part of the great reign of God. This is the reign that the Jews had been waiting for centuries to throw out all their oppressors, and Jesus comes along and tells them the great reign of God is like the smallest of mustard seeds that is planted in soil, germinates, and grows about a foot and a half high, so that little birds can nest in its branches.

Instead of being compared to the great cedars of Lebanon, they are to get small and be like a mustard bush? What did it do to their hope for what God was going to do in the world? It might be something like saying, "You know Austin Heights is a great church. When you speak in this town, your voice is like the roar of a mouse." Doesn't sound so good, does it?

But I think Jesus is reminding them and he's reminding us: God doesn't look at things the way we look at things. We measure greatness with size, numbers, volume. God measures greatness in faithfulness.

You've heard this countless times from me, but I remind you over and over. When God wanted to save humanity and all the animals from the coming deluge, he chose an ornery alcoholic named Noah. When God wanted to deliver the slaves from Egypt, he did not use the number two most powerful man in all of Egypt to do so – when Moses was a younger man. No, he called stuttering Moses when he was nothing more than a shepherd out in the far reaches of the desert. God defeated

the giant Goliath with a boy and a slingshot. God's prophets were chosen from the margins, far from the centers of power. When God decided to act directly in history, he chose a teen-aged girl to give birth to a baby in a cow stall, in a barn, in a backwater town on the far side of the empire. When Jesus taught, he talked about lilies of the field, sparrows, a lost coin, a lost sheep, yeast in bread, a single pearl, and a mustard seed. He chose 12 ragtag disciples, none of whom made the cover of Forbes magazine. God used a stubborn donkey to speak to Balaam; a lying brothel owner named Rahab; and the greatest leader of the New Testament after Jesus was a converted murderer named Paul.

God uses the small, the humble, the ordinary.

Small things, tiny seeds – Jesus did not live or heal or teach on some grand scale. But little and modest.

**[Jane reads “Small Things” by Anna Kamienska]**

In the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer tells of the Parson, “poor but abounding in goodness... he was humble, gracious” and “he was able to have enough with little.” And though Chaucer specifically is referring to the Parson's modest income and simple lifestyle, it is also an apt description of the Parson's ministry. He had submitted himself to the modest and little ways of good pastoral ministry. He noticed the little things of ministry – of caring for people, listening to people, visiting people, teaching, preaching, and praying. He was pastoral; he was prophetic, but everything he did was little.

Years ago, when I was first starting out in the ministry, I remember speaking to a woman who volunteered three times a week tutoring children after school. She said humbly, “It's not much. It's just the little something I can do to give back to the community that gave so much to me and my family.”

This is how God works – a woman sitting down with a child helping her learn to read, passing out a box of food to a hungry person, reaching over and putting your hand on the shoulder of someone who is hurting, bending down so you can look a child in the eye, taking the time to drink a cup of coffee with a friend who needs to talk, praying a simple prayer alone where no one else can hear you, and on and on. These are the ways the kingdom of God works and spreads like leaven in bread dough, like mustard seeds growing into a bush. This is the way God enters the world: through smallness, the ordinary and humble.

Theologian Douglas Christie suggests that learning to pray and learning to be Christian takes “the capacity and willingness to become small,” to open ourselves to the larger world of God’s creation. It is the way we enter into God. If we want to know the God who came to us in Jesus, then we quit looking in the big and grand and start paying attention to these same small places, little people, and humble actions – we become small. Perhaps we must become small so we can participate in the work of God.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the oldest place of continuous worship in Christianity, is a large basilica. Inside, you walk over to an almost obscure corner, to the grotto, an ancient very small cave, going back to the second or third century tradition says this was the actual birthplace of Jesus. One must enter by way of a very small door, at the bottom of three or four narrow steps. You have to duck and squeeze your way through.

It is as if the portal between heaven and earth, between the eternal and temporal, between God and humanity is the small and little.

**[Rebecca reads “A Green Crab’s Shell” by Mark Doty]**

And what if the small and little is the hope of the world?

A mustard plant was and is a highly invasive plant. In the first century world of the Jews and Romans it was considered something like Bahia grass. Plant one seed and before you know it, it has spread everywhere. Indeed, there were severe and clear guidelines on the planting of mustard. And some gardens did not allow mustard to be grown anywhere near for fear of it spreading.

But there was another characteristic of mustard. Roman historian Pliny the Elder, who died in AD 79, said its pungent taste was often used for seasoning in food but it was also used as a medicine. He said, “Pounded it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poisons of fungi. ... For toothache it is chewed. It is very beneficial for all stomach troubles.”

So, this ordinary and smallest of all seeds can spread like wildfire and be an instrument of healing, all at the same time. How interesting.

Perhaps what this old world needs is not another ruling empire, not correct or better information, not a return to some sort of moral law, not new scientific discoveries, nor faster economic growth. Maybe what is needed today is the same thing needed in the first century: healing.

Could it be that through this small and ordinary seed, God seeks to bring healing to this broken and warring world? Could it be through such small churches as Austin Heights God seeks to bring healing to wider world?

But our job is not to try to heal the world. All we need to do is to learn to allow God to heal through us in small and modest ways right here where we are. What happens is that through the little God works in ways beyond us, healing the world.

**[Jerry reads “Starting with Little Things” by William Stafford]**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.