

**“Small is Beautiful?”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – July 30, 2023**

**Please Read:
Philippians 4:10-13
Matthew 13:31-33**

As an American, I have grown up with the assumption that bigger is better. There’s little question that mainstream America is predisposed toward “large and in charge.” *Fortune Magazine* doesn’t list the *smallest* 500 corporations, but the *largest*. Walmart Stores is the world’s largest corporation, in case you wondered, just above Amazon.com, the State Grid Corporation of China, and China National Petroleum Corporation and China Petrochemical Corporation...¹ The United States has the largest corporation in the world, the largest economy in the world, the largest military in the world, but also the largest amount of energy and product consumption, and the largest debt in the world... Whether it’s good for us or not, we Americans seem to have an insatiable appetite to be bigger with everything.

So, it’s quite a jolt to our cultural sensibilities when Jesus says, “the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.” Jesus knows his seeds. The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds in the world, about 3-5/64th” in diameter. But the mustard plant can grow into one of the biggest shrubs, even 23 feet high, large enough for birds to nest in... Jesus also says, “The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that leavens three measures of flour... which my commentary tells me is about 60 pounds of flour, enough to make bread for a small village!”²

Both of these parables speak of spectacular growth from insignificant or humble beginnings. Such is the way of the kingdom. God can take small and make it beautiful.

Jesus also uses the illustration of a *mustard seed* in Matthew 17:20. He says that if you have the *faith* as small as a mustard seed, you can *move mountains*... Jesus is saying, I think, that *the quantity* of faith is not nearly as important as *the object* of faith. As we put our faith in God, not just with our mouths, but with our lives, reality changes. Our minds change, our priorities change, and so our words and actions change. It’s the butterfly of faith effect. Everything is affected by that turning and putting our faith not in the things or people of this world, but in this One who has done for us that which we cannot do for ourselves.

Faith doesn’t mean we don’t make an effort, but rather we have a very different orientation and motivation. We trust that God loves us, and that God has a plan for our lives, and that God is at work in our lives. Faith in Christ is the mustard seed, the yeast, that makes the Kingdom of Heaven grow in and through even us! Paradoxically, we are then able to focus more on what truly matters in life: family and friends, loving and working not for self-gain

¹ *Fortune*, accessed online, July 12, 2023: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_companies_by_revenue

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 523, note 5.

but for all that is good, true, beautiful, and just. A smile here, a pat on the back there, a listening ear. Truth told in love. A word of repentance. A word of forgiveness. Writing a letter to say thank you. Or I love you. It's amazing what one or two people in your life who are encouraging and positive can do...

As you know, I was away this past week for the memorial service of Kim's father, Dalton Harrison. He was someone to whom I owe a great deal, not only because I married his lovely daughter! He was an encourager, and one of my favorite things to do would be to go out to Starbucks with Dalton and have a coffee and enjoy a piece of lemon cake together. He was quick to listen and slow to give advice. But when he gave it, it was wise. Perhaps the most important relationships are not out there in the workplace or the halls of business and politics, but at home in the kitchen, or at school in the classroom, or even here in the fellowship of the church... It's not the utilitarian relationships that matter, but the more hidden, loving relationships that matter. Kim shared that even as Dalton was in his last days of hospice care, when she was sleeping near the hospital bed that they had brought in for him, he mustered the strength to get up in the middle of the night, cover her feet with blankets and pat her lovingly. That small act of tenderness, of love, will never be forgotten...

As Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, we must realize that the small is beautiful principle is not just about us or our circle of family and friends. The mustard seed of the Kingdom of Heaven is about the transformation of whole societies and entire nations. I was listening to a podcast of Diana Butler Bass and Brian McLaren as they were talking about the recent Wild Goose Festival, a gathering of progressive Christians in North Carolina, and they were talking about how we are in a paradigm shift of history. It's still hidden, but it's probably of the magnitude of the 16th century Reformation. We know that Climate Change is real. The political crisis that we are in right now is real. How we as Christians respond, even in small faithful ways, can make a difference...

To be sure, the kingdom can seem far away... like if you're in Ukraine right now... or anywhere in the drought-stricken Middle East... Or if you are experiencing racial or gender discrimination... Mustard seeds remind us that the Kingdom of heaven is hidden. Signs of the Kingdom may seem impossible to see, but what Jesus is saying, is, wherever there is faith, the Kingdom can emerge and grow...

In Eugene Peterson's book, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, he relays how his experience in a very small seminary community on a quiet side street bordering the "maelstrom of noisy, jostling, harried, secular, cutthroat, competitive New York City" gave him an early insight to the importance of one-on-one relationships in Christian community. It wasn't the big football stadium crowd experiences, but the small, seemingly insignificant Christian community that prepared him for profound transformational ministry in the world. He writes this:

“I didn’t know it at the time, but what absorbed in my subconscious, which eventually surfaced years later, was a developing conviction that the most effective strategy for change, for revolution – at least on the large scale that the kingdom of God involves – comes from a minority working from the margins. I could not have articulated it then, but my seminary experience later germinated into the embrace of a vocational identity as necessarily minority, that a minority people working from the margins has the best chance of being a community capable of penetrating the non-community, the mob, the depersonalized, function-defined crowd that is the sociological norm of America...”³ or any given population...

Margaret Mead once said, ““Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

We are a minority community here in New Canaan, to be sure. But make no mistake about the importance of our influence in this town. Jesus took 12 misfits and changed the world. Count the schools, hospitals and redeemed lives over the centuries. Consider the results of the atheistic societies of the past century. No comparison. And the amazing thing is Jesus continues to turn the world upside down through the likes of us! The invitation for us is to allow the little faith we have and the small community that we are to continue to grow and transform the people, the society the world around us. It’s the small, simple acts of faith, humble acts of compassion and love that make all the difference.

The challenge is, we have to have *integrity* with what we *say* we believe and how we *live* what we believe. Max Dupree tells the story of when one of his daughters gave birth to an extremely premature baby. Zoe was born weighing just a little over one pound. Max rushed to the hospital to be of whatever help he could. When he got there the head nurse said, “This is what you need to do, Max. You need to come every day and stick your hands through the sides of Zoe’s incubator and you need to stroke her body again and again. And as you do that, you need to say to her over and over again that you love her, because what Zoe needs more than anything else is to *connect your voice with your touch*.” That applies to all of us... I need that and you need that... Our churches and our world need that...

Our mission statement here has four pillars: to live spiritually, to love inclusively, to learn continuously, and to leave a legacy. We are saying that in Jesus Christ, God’s Word and God’s touch are fully and wholly one... That’s what makes Jesus the Savior of the World. The question for us is *how do voice and touch come together?* When the church seems like an irrelevance to the world, at the core of it is the breakdown between voice and touch,

³ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (Harper One: New York, 2011), 16.

what we say and what we do!⁴ Christian fundamentals should trigger in peoples' minds incredible acts of forgiveness and radical loving-kindness, a concern and care for the environment; compassion for the poor and vulnerable.

The Kingdom of heaven came into being as God's voice and touch came together for us in Jesus Christ. How that mustard seed of the Kingdom will grow is really about us, about how we will live out our faith in the insanity of this world. Mother Theresa once famously said, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can all do small things with great love." Friends, Jesus calls you and me to be his voice and touch in the world. May the small seeds of our witness grow into a great Kingdom sanctuary where others find rest, hope and encouragement. May the yeast of God's hidden, but always faithful love, make us agents of heavenly transformation for our families and colleagues, indeed, for New Canaan and the world.

In the name of the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

⁴ Mark Labberton tells this story of Max Dupree and makes this connection of Word and Touch...