

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Think Small

Sunday, February 10, 2019

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Matthew 13:31–32

Many folks thought the Super Bowl wasn't so super. In fact, many called it a "super bore." Unless, of course, you are really in to punting. The punting was spectacular. One Tweet said, "Have two punters ever won the Super Bowl MVP award?"

I can't recall a Super Bowl being so criticized for not meeting expectations. Social media took a blow torch to the game. One tweet said, "I've had more exciting dental exams."

We Americans are proud of the fact that the Super Bowl is the biggest sporting event in the world. So, when it doesn't meet our HUGE expectations, we feel cheated. I didn't think it was *that* horrible of a game, but the fallout over it is a reminder how much we value BIGNESS. We celebrate the big. We revere the huge. The bigger, the better. If something or someone doesn't measure up, we will crucify it.

Ironically, Jesus was not impressed with big things. I am not saying Jesus wants us to boycott the Super Bowl, although it would be interesting to watch it with Jesus. I wonder what he would have to say.

But big things were not a big deal to Jesus. What *was* a big deal to Jesus were tiny things. In fact, Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed. Take a look:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

–Matthew 13:31–32

King Duncan says that "If Jesus were telling that parable today he might point to a giant Sequoia in California's Sequoia National Park. Here is a picture of one. It is called The General Sherman. It is one of the most massive living things on planet Earth. It stands nearly 275 feet tall with a girth of more than 102 feet near its base. It is estimated to weigh almost 3,000 tons. "And yet here is what the seed of the Sequoia tree looks like. It is about the size of an oat flake. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, a Sequoia seed

weighs only 1/6,000 of an ounce. Talk about a mighty plant from a tiny seed!

"Of course, Jesus didn't have a giant Sequoia nearby, so he spoke of the tiny mustard seed.

"It is fascinating. The gospel is really a unique celebration of what seems small and insignificant. Bethlehem was a small town. Nazareth was, too. Calvary was a tiny spot on the globe. There was nothing particularly significant about the profession of carpenter or fisherman or tax-collector. None of the disciples or even Jesus himself held positions of power and significance. Jesus only had 12 followers, and they were not very impressive. In fact, one betrayed him. Yet, today, of the 7½ billion people on earth, 1 out of 3 bear the name Christian" (Duncan, sermon on the parable of the mustard seed).

So, what do we make of all this? What do we make of Jesus' preoccupation with the power of little things? It flies in the face of what we value. It goes against the big things we are so impressed with. What are we supposed to learn from it?

Well, I am about to tell you a little secret that will change your life if you let it. This secret can open all kinds of door for you: ***Jesus preferred talking about little things because they showed off God's power.***

This is what Jesus was driving at when he told his disciples that if they had as much faith as a grain of mustard seed, they could say to a sycamore tree, "Pluck yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea and it would obey" (Luke 17:6). In another passage, Jesus said that if we have faith as small as a mustard seed we can move mountains.

So often people misunderstand these verses. They think, "I can accomplish the impossible with just a little faith." No! It is God who is doing the impossible! You just decided to be available and go along for the ride! We think our faith and God's power is a 50/50 equation. It's not. It is really 10% us to 90% God. Jesus teaches us this when he compares the Kingdom of Heaven to yeast:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” –Matthew 13:33

What does bread taste like without yeast? Terrible. Can bread rise without yeast? No! Yeast is essential for bread to work. So, what is Jesus trying to say? The yeast is God. Transformation cannot happen without God!

When I look at my life and all the great things that have happened to me, one thing is clear: I had nothing to do with them. I did not push for them. I did not seek them out. They happened when I least expected, and they came in a form I had not anticipated.

Here are just a few examples from my life:

Meeting Brandy – I wasn’t expecting to meet her and be knocked off my feet.

Having our baby Paul – We certainly were not expecting it! He was a beautiful surprise.

My call to ministry – At 16, I did not know there was more to life than sports and girls!

Being appointed to Johns Creek UMC – This church was not even on my radar.

My friendships – I had nothing to do with setting them up. They just happened.

Have you noticed that most of the things God blesses us with come out of left field? We didn’t predict them. We didn’t anticipate them. We had nothing to do with them! I think there is a reason for that. God wants to remind us that we are not in control – He is. He is the one that sets things in motion. He is the one that works his plan out. He is the yeast in the bread of life. All we have to do is be available and get out of the way.

Believe it or not, using a handsaw teaches us this lesson. Take a look at this handsaw. Steve Delpome writes, “Anyone who has ever worked with wood in their life has used a handsaw. Even if you’ve only ever tried one once, you know what it feels like to use it. You start a groove. You push and pull the saw. You cuss and swear at it, and you begin to sweat as it gets stuck in the groove as you try to cut.

“But there is something about the handsaw that we almost always overlook: it only gets stuck because we try to force it to do what it wasn’t meant to do.

“Try it. Grab your handsaw and a piece of wood. Start a groove. But instead of pressing down on the wood as you cut like you usually do, just let the saw’s teeth work back and forth across the wood, doing the job it was designed to do. You’ll find that the handsaw is not

such a difficult tool to use after all. You’ll see the work is quite quick actually! As a matter of fact, there’s a good chance you’ll get a more accurate cut with it than with your power tools. You might even find there’s something of a Zen feeling or a dharma to the task, as you move with the saw and it moves with you, each doing nothing more than that which you were created to do.

“All we need is to allow the handsaw to do what it does naturally. When we push the handsaw, we try to exert power and control over what it will naturally do. But if we allow the handsaw to do what it naturally does, we’ll find that we will be quite surprised and impressed by the results!” (“The Hand Saw Metaphor”).

It is the same way with God’s power. We were created for God’s power to flow through us. It’s supposed to be almost effortless. But so often we try to force it or manipulate it. We try to control it, and it never works. We just end up making a bunch of mistakes and getting stuck.

I get in trouble when I seek to control. I don’t seem to have the same strength when I am trying to orchestrate everything, instead of letting God handle it. When everything feels like I am swimming upstream, it is usually because I am not letting God flow in my life. I am impeding God by my own pride, or fear, or stubbornness.

But when I choose to let everything go and take the hand of God, life changes. I feel the flow of God, and the struggle goes away. Things fall into place as they should.

So, if you feel weak today, if you feel like you are at the end of your rope and the only way you are going to make it is if God helps you, then congratulations! Something wonderful is about to happen because God likes to display his power through our weakness. Truth be told, God is a show-off. That’s God’s little secret. He likes taking what seems small and insignificant and transforming it into something unexpected. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses ... For when I am weak, then I am strong.

–2nd Corinthians 12:9–10

How do you apply this to your life today? If you feel overwhelmed by life, just allow the flow of God, and things will fall into place. If you are struggling with a problem and can’t find an answer anywhere, just allow the flow of God, and the answer will come. If you feel

desperate, just allow the flow of God, and you will find what you need.

God is at work all around us. We just have to find where and get in that flow and let it happen. That is what Jesus meant by the “Kingdom of God.” That simply means “God at work.” Until God’s Kingdom fully comes on earth, God is at work in the world. It might start small. You may not see it. But our inability to see doesn’t affect God’s ability to be.

God is at work here at Johns Creek UMC. Do you see it? If you struggle with seeing it, remember Jesus’ tip: don’t look for something big. Look for something small. Remember the mustard seed. Remember the yeast. That is where you will find God at work, because God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. God turns small things into great big things. King Duncan wrote about the amazing story of Rick Ruzzamenti. “Not too long ago, Ruzzamenti, a native of Riverside, California, made the news with a radical act of kindness for a stranger. Rick gave one of his kidneys to someone he didn’t even know.

“Now you and I might donate a kidney for a family member. Maybe even for a good friend. But a complete stranger? Rick was inspired by a friend who had donated a kidney to help someone. Rick’s kidney ended up in a man in Livingston, New Jersey.

“What makes this story more wonderful is that Rick’s act started a chain of donations. The niece of the man who received Rick’s kidney made a donation, giving one of her kidneys to a stranger, and so on. Within a relatively short time, 30 people have received kidneys as the result of the chain of giving set off by Rick’s act. Here is a picture of all of them.

“Donald Terry, a man in Joliet, Illinois, was the most recent recipient. He was expecting to have to wait five years or more for a transplant. “With some 67,000 people dying every year from kidney failure in the United States, the need for transplant donors is great. Rick Ruzzamenti is matter-of-fact about his gift. According to the website which reported his story, he said, “People think it’s so odd that I’m donating a kidney ... I think it’s so odd that they think it’s so odd” (Duncan, “The Mustard Seed”).

Ruzzamenti’s one kind act set in motion something huge. And he will tell you he didn’t plan it. He didn’t expect it. It just happened. Just like the growth of that mustard seed. Just like the yeast in the bread. That’s how God works.

“Mark was walking home from school one day when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all of the books he was carrying, along with two sweaters, a baseball bat, a glove, and a small tape recorder. Mark knelt down and helped the boy pick up the scattered articles. Since they were going the same way, he helped to carry part of the burden.

“As they walked, Mark discovered the boy’s name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball, and history, that he was having a lot of trouble with his other subjects, and that he had just broken up with his girlfriend.

“They arrived at Bill’s home first, and Mark was invited in for a Coke and to watch some television. The afternoon passed pleasantly with a few laughs and some shared small talk, then Mark went home.

“They continued to see each other around school, had lunch together once or twice, then both graduated from junior high school. They ended up in the same high school where they had brief contacts over the years. Finally the long-awaited senior year came, and three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could talk.

“Bill reminded him of the day years ago when they had first met. ‘Do you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?’ asked Bill. ‘You see, I cleaned out my locker because I didn’t want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mother’s sleeping pills, and I was going home to commit suicide. But after we spent some time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had killed myself, I would have missed that time and so many others that might follow. So you see, Mark, when you picked up my books that day, you did a lot more. **You saved my life.**” (*Story found on the internet. Source unknown*)

Discussion Questions on the Back

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why do you think we are so impressed with “Big” things? Do you think this can affect our ability to see where God is working?
2. Think and/or name significant events in your life. What kind of role did God play in them? Were any of them the result of your will or actions? Were any of them “Godincidences”? What do those experiences teach you about how God works?
3. Name a time when God’s power manifested in your weakness. Describe your thoughts and feelings during and after this event.
4. Have you ever felt in “the Zone” or flow with God? Describe that experience. What did you learn?
5. God is at work in the small and weak things to show off his power. How does this change the way you live out your faith?



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