

“LITTLE THINGS WITH BIG MEANING – I – THE MUSTARD SEED”

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Elkton United Methodist Church

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Psalm 27

Matthew 13:31-32

Well, if you’ve known me for any time at all, you know that I don’t preach long sermons. That’s not my forte. I say what the Lord leads me to say, and then I sit down, and truth be told, I have a hard time listening to long sermons. After about a half hour or so, my mind begins to wander, and if a sermon goes closer to 45 minutes or an hour, I’ve probably checked out.

And so it is that, when I read a story from Tony Campolo this week, I almost laughed right out loud, because he was talking about preaching, and more specifically, effective preaching. He was telling about a Good Friday where, similar to what GEMA did this year, a group of seven pastors from inner city churches in Philadelphia were preaching on the seven last words of Christ from the cross.

As it happens, Tony preached the sixth word, and as he recalled, he really nailed his presentation. Listen to what he wrote about that day: “I want to tell you, I was good. The more I preached, the more the people in that congregation turned

on, and the more they turned on, the better I got. I got better and better and better. I got so good that I wanted to take notes on me! At the end of my message, the congregation broke loose. I was absolutely thrilled to hear the hallelujahs and their cries of joy.”

Well, after he finished he went and sat down on the pew next to the pastor who would be preaching the final word, the seventh word. The man smiled at him, reached over with his hand and squeezed his knee and said, “You did all right!”

Tony, never a shrinking violet, with a twinkle in his eye, turned to the old pastor and said, “Pastor, are you going to be able to top that?” The old man smiled and said, “Son, you just sit back, ‘cause this old man is going to do you in!” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 214)

And “do you in” did he! Tony said that man preached like nobody ever preached before. He had the congregation in the palm of his hand – and get this! He preached for an hour and a half, but Tony says, it went by in a heartbeat of passion and excitement, and by the end of the sermon, the crowd was cheering for God and hope and possibility and new life!

There is nothing like a great communicator, and friends, the words of today's Gospel lesson were spoken by the greatest communicator ever – Jesus our Lord. Whether he spoke for a long time or a short time, whether it was in a more formal setting like a synagogue or on a dusty road in Galilee, Jesus had a way of connecting with people like no one else. And he was particularly good in the use of metaphors, which is what he was doing in this passage from Matthew.

You heard Mike read it: Jesus said, "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."

Now, why was Jesus talking to the people around him about a mustard seed, and why did Matthew make sure to include it in his gospel? Well, I think both of them did that to encourage people. Remember that all the while Jesus ministered to people, trouble was stirring around him. One day, the disciples would think things were going great, and the next, people were out to get Jesus and them. One day, they could see how the work he and they were doing was making a difference, and the next, evil would rear its ugly head and they would wonder why they were even bothering to try.

And the people for whom Matthew wrote his Gospel, some nearly 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, were discouraged. They knew that Jesus had promised to come again, and year after year passed by without it happening, and they were losing hope. On top of that, the early church struggled to find its footing. So Matthew wanted to prop them up, to keep hope ever before them – and he did that with stories like these from Jesus' ministry.

With that background in mind, that both Jesus and Matthew were trying to offer hope and encouragement, let's look more closely at what Jesus is saying through this metaphor.

First, I think he was inviting them not to discount little things, for they can be deceiving. Little things have the potential to be great. A little faith can move mountains. A little courage can change things. A little action can set in motion bigger actions. Little things hold within them the potential to be great, just like that little mustard seed.

Then secondly, his next words, show them just how true that is, because he reminds them that the mustard seed eventually turns into a great huge bush, so

great and so huge that birds come and make a home in it. You know, in researching this sermon, I found out that Jesus was not kidding about that, because mustard bushes are massive – they take on a life of their own – they grow where they want to go and spread as far as they want to. You can't stop them, or, if you try, it takes enormous amounts of time and effort to halt their growth.

Oh boy – what Jesus was saying! Plant the mustard seed of faith, plant the mustard seed of action, and see what God will do with it. It will grow wild, and spread far and wide, nothing will be able to stop it. The possibilities are endless.

“That’s what the kingdom of heaven is like,” Jesus says to them and to us. Plant your seeds with faith, and wait until you see what God can do, the lives he can touch, the situations he can redeem, and the love that can be shared. Plant your seeds and watch the kingdom of heaven appear before your eyes – right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

I’ve told you before that I sit on the Board of Ordained Ministry for our annual conference, and often, when we’re interviewing candidates for ministry, we will ask them, “where do you see the kingdom of heaven?” We have heard some

wonderful answers to that question over the years, many times accompanied by tears, because the stories of what God can do with seeds of faith and action are incredible and life-changing.

So let me ask you that question this morning. “Where do you see the kingdom of heaven?” Think about it for a moment. Where do you see things happening that you know only God could have made come about?

And let me take it one step further, let me make it specific to this time and place in our history. Because, as we’re all well aware, we’re in a tough and trying time right now. Like the disciples and like the people of the early church, we’re easily discouraged these days with the daily news of disease and death, of hunkering down, sheltering in place, and social distancing from others. And the longer this goes on, the harder it is. I’ve told a lot of people this week that I think we all did okay up until about Easter, but now it’s getting hard. It seems like this will never end, and we’re getting tired, and yes, discouraged.

So Jesus’ invitation to the disciples is something we desperately need to consider this morning, because I think it, too, will lift our eyes beyond the present

suffering into a place of hope and confidence. So back to my question, “Where do you see the kingdom of heaven in the world today?”

Let me tell you some of the places I’ve seen it of late:

- I see the Kingdom of Heaven in the daily ritual in New York City, where at 7 pm every night, the people of New York go out on the streets, or lean out their windows, or stand on their balconies and applaud all of the healthcare workers who are doing everything they can to save lives. I see it in the first responders to take their trucks and ambulances and go in front of hospitals and ring their sirens and bells to show the healthcare workers their support. A little thing maybe, a mustard seed, but what a world of good it does to those who are sacrificing so much to care for all of God’s people.

- I see the Kingdom of Heaven when bags of food are left on a neighbor’s doorstep, or a caravan of cars drives by the home of someone celebrating a birthday, or people stay up late at night sewing masks for people to wear

to protect themselves and others. All of those acts are seeds planted in faith, and God makes mighty things happen through them.

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- I see the Kingdom of Heaven in funny ways as well. I'm thinking of the videos I've seen on Facebook – like the mother praying about her struggle with trying to teach her children at home, or the father apologizing to every teacher about not chaperoning field trips after he's had to deal with his kids on his own. They are hysterically funny, yet underneath the laughs is the message that teachers matter, and they deserve so much more credit than they usually get.

- I see the Kingdom of Heaven in the calls, and cards, and letters, and emails that people, many of you, are sending to each other. When you pick up the phone to call someone, or write a note on a card, or even text message someone, you may not think it's a big deal, you might, indeed, think it's a little thing – say, the size of a mustard seed – but that call, that card, that letter or text, can change the way a day is going for someone during these tough times.

- I also want to say that I think these worship service videos are seeds being planted for the Kingdom of Heaven, because so many people are being touched by them. I told you last week that I've heard from people as far away as North and South Carolina, Colorado, Massachusetts and Maine. Many of the videos are having nearly 500 people watching them, which is incredible. And I can't tell you the number of cards, notes and texts I've gotten about how seeing us – this great team of ours – doing these services is lifting spirits and offering hope and encouragement during a tough time. Signs of the kingdom!

- Most assuredly, the thousands of scientists and medical people who are working tirelessly to find a cure for the coronavirus and to come up with a vaccine are signs of the kingdom. Each of them are planting their individual seed, and in God's time, they will bear fruit and an end will come to this horrible pandemic.

- And finally, I want to share with you a story about seeds of faith that have been planted by one of our youth – Courtney Forman. When Courtney was in fifth grade a few years ago, she started a book drive. She collects books and then gets them to people who need them. So far she has collected over 5000 books. Now, in this time when libraries and book

stores are closed, and people have hours and hours on their hands, her work has really grown. Just this week, Courtney and her parents have delivered over 55 sets of books. And she still has a bunch of books should others (maybe some of you) want something to read. As a matter of fact, if you do, there will be information posted at the end of this video. But, back to Courtney, there she was, starting as a fifth grader, planting seeds. I'm sure when she started she had no idea what would happen, whether one person would want a book or a thousand would. She just did what her heart told her to do, she planted that seed, and look what God has done with it. A sign of the kingdom of heaven – absolutely!

Oh dear friends, as my sermon title said, “Little Things Have Big Meaning,” and certainly we can learn much from the tiny mustard seed. When we take what we have, however little or much, and offer it to God, God can do amazing things.

And when we look around us, especially in hard times like these, we would do well to remember the mustard seed, and know that with God, all things are possible, even ending a pandemic.

Let me close with one more little story. A young man was crushed one day to get a rejection letter from the college he had always had his heart set on attending. When he got the letter, he was at home with his mother and brother-in-law who was also discouraged because of a professional setback at work. It was a sad scene. For a moment, his mother disappeared from the room, and when she came back, she told both of them to open their hands, and into them she placed a mustard seed, for she wanted them to remember that God had good planned for them, even if they couldn't see it now.

Friends, if you are discouraged right now because of the pandemic or for any other reason, find a seed – if you have a mustard seed, great; but if not, any seed will do. Hold it in your hand and let it be a sign for you of the Kingdom of Heaven, a sign of hope and promise, a sign of the God who can and will do amazing things. May it be so.

Amen.