

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Small Acts with Kingdom Results

Luke 13:18-21

One person tells about how her church's pastor was organizing an evangelistic outreach in the community. The idea was to use small acts of kindness to demonstrate Christ's love. So the pastor phoned several neighborhood grocery stores and laundromats for permission to do specific services. On one call, the employee who answered the phone hesitated, then said, "I'll need to ask the manager, but first, let me make sure I understand: You want to clean up the parking lot, retrieve shopping carts, hold umbrellas for customers, and you don't want anything in return." "Yes, that's right," replied the pastor. After disappearing for a moment, the employee returned to the phone. "I'm sorry," he said, "we can't let you do that because if we let you do it, we'd have to let everyone else do it, too!"¹

Though it probably wasn't what the store intended by its answer, the reply sounds like there's some risk in kindness getting out of hand. Who knows what might happen if deeds of love multiply beyond reasonable expectations. Better not to turn something loose that may expand beyond our control.

In today's Scripture passage, Luke reminds us that Jesus' life and ministry have unleashed something into the world that's beyond human management and control. The reign of God, God's sovereign love and saving power, are operating in and through Jesus and the community of his followers. God's dominion or kingdom is showing up in various ways. Healings are one example. Right before today's text, Luke tells us about an episode of the reign of God. A woman bound by Satan for years, bent over and unable to straighten up, has been set free. God's desire to rescue, his power to save, has released her from the Devil's grip. Though some of the religious leaders were opposed to Jesus doing this kind of thing on the Sabbath, most of the people at the synagogue service were delighted.

Then come two parables, back to back, where Jesus draws us into thinking about what's going on in a deed like the one the worshipers have just witnessed. It may have been one single moment, on one single day, in one single place, in one single life, but that one experience of deliverance is part of a larger reality that's on the scene and unfolding in the world. Jesus asks, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?" (v. 18).

In the first answer to his own question, Jesus compares God's reign to a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his garden. Now even those of us who don't have much experience with cooking or agriculture know that a mustard seed is no big deal when it comes to its literal size. In Jesus' own time, the mustard seed was proverbial for its smallness. One person has calculated that it takes 725 to 760 mustard seeds to make a gram, yet the mustard plant grows to a height of eight to nine feet.² So the picture Jesus gives us in this parable is a picture of small beginnings and great results.

In the second parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to yeast, sometimes called leaven. Yeast is old, fermented dough that's added to a fresh lump of dough in order to start the leavening process in it. In Jesus' parable, a woman mixes the yeast into the flour. Actually, the Greek word for what the woman did means "hid." It's as if she attempted to

hide the yeast by putting it in a great quantity of flour. In fact, her “three measures” would be equivalent to nearly 50 pounds of flour, enough to make bread to feed 150 people! Sounds like she may need to go back and review her recipe card. So the picture Jesus gives us in this parable is again a picture of small beginnings with powerful results.

This is certainly in keeping with a lot of what the Bible says about God’s ways. Just because something, or someone, is small, invisible, or insignificant in the world’s eyes doesn’t mean that thing or that person is small and insignificant in God’s eyes. On the contrary, God often likes, or prefers, small. God regularly works well with what appears to be minor, perhaps even to the point of being invisible, hidden, at least to human perception.

This doesn’t mean that when it comes to matters of the kingdom, we should set our sights low and not really expect much from God. On the contrary, we worship and serve a God who has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. A God who is making all things new. A God who has promised the new heavens and new earth. A God whose self-giving love has conquered sin, death, and the Devil. A God whose redeeming mercy reaches to the ends of the earth and encompasses the vastness of the cosmos.

And yet at the same time a God whose will to heal his creation involves healing the individual human heart. A God who calls each of us into restored relationship with himself, one sinner at a time. A global God whose reign of righteousness touches us personally, and who operates locally, in the ordinary, the humble, and the small.

Eugene Peterson comments on the life of Carmelite monk brother Lawrence, who is widely known for his book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Peterson says:

Brother Lawrence was nothing if not basic. He lived with an incredible simplicity and directness. His conversion was characteristic of everything about him. On a midwinter day at the age of eighteen, he saw a dry, leafless tree standing gaunt against the snow. It stirred deep thoughts within him of the change the coming spring would bring. At that moment, he decided to be a person in whom the spring would come, letting the life of Christ take root and blossom in his whole being. That’s all. It was that simple. The winter tree preached a sermon to him. He repented and believed.

Lawrence became a cook in a monastery and spent *the rest of his life* among pots and pans. He cooked meals, baked bread, and swept the kitchen floor, all the while practicing the presence of God.³

Practicing the presence of God. We certainly do that by following, being familiar with, and taking action with regard to the major events, movements, and trends of our times. But a lot of the time, we’re charged with simply doing the small things that embody and reflect God’s reign in the world. We’re called to do the things that to human eyes may appear insignificant or perhaps even fruitless. The things whose potency isn’t immediate. The things whose results aren’t instantaneous and dramatic. The fact is, our daily testimony to the gospel may look less like success and more like scattering tiny unimpressive seeds.

And yet those seeds can contain enormous potential for life and righteousness and transformation. As A. J. Gordon has written:

The day of small things can become the life of biggest and best things. A small word spoken at the right time may set a whole life straight. A gentle smile may brighten the way for the man with a heavy load. The small bit of time with the Book and the knee bent will hallow the day’s task. The still, small voice listened to may turn the world’s tide. “The small in God’s hand becomes big.”⁴

The small in God's hand becomes big. This is a much-needed word of hope, especially when we face circumstances, challenges, and events that seem beyond our capacity to alter or overcome. As one commentator has pointed out, we need to remember where today's two parables are located in the larger story of Jesus. Luke has situated them within the tension-filled journey to Jerusalem. Opposition to Jesus is increasing, and his suffering will only intensify as he follows the route to the cross. But he remains confident that God is present and working. Just because the task is immense doesn't mean that the kingdom is failing. The kingdom is still there, frequently in the small things that eventually produce big results.

Yesterday we had our church yard sale. It was a fruitful event for strengthening our fellowship and engaging with our community. But remember that followers of Jesus aren't the only ones who have yard sales. Actually, one preacher tells about a time when the Devil was having a yard sale of his own. He says,

... all of his tools were marked with different prices. They were a fiendish lot. There was hatred, jealousy, deceit, lying, pride—all at expensive prices. But over to the side of the yard on display was a tool more obviously worn than any of the other tools. It was also the most costly. The tool was labeled, DISCOURAGEMENT.

When questioned, the Devil said, "It's more useful to me than any other tool. When I can't bring down my victims with any of the rest of these tools, I use discouragement, because so few people realize that it belongs to me."⁵

The Devil would have you believe that the problem is unfixable, the issue intractable, and the hardship insurmountable. But be encouraged. Be hopeful. Remember the mustard seed and the leaven. Small beginnings can yield powerful results. Small acts can affect and shape the lives of others, not just in the moment but far beyond a particular time and place. As Eugene Peterson has written, "Our opinions and arguments on world affairs make nothing happen, but several times a day, we have chances at peacemaking, praying, and loving that implement the kingdom."⁶

In his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Shane Claiborne writes about his experience of serving with Mother Teresa in her ministry in India. Claiborne says:

I fell in love with the Home for the Destitute and Dying and spent most days there. I helped folks eat, massaged muscles, gave baths, and basically tried to spoil people who really deserved it. Each day, folks would die, and each day, we would go out onto the streets and bring in new people. The goal was not to keep people alive (we had few resources for doing that) but to allow people to die with dignity, with someone loving them, singing, laughing, so they were not alone. Sometimes folks with medical training would come by and be overwhelmed with frustration because we had so few medical supplies, and the sisters would hastily explain that our mission was not to prolong life but to help people die well. . . .

While the temptation to do great things is always before us, in Khaligat I learned the discipline of doing small things with great deliberation. Mother Teresa used to say, "We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it."

Doing small things with great love. Things that participate in the sovereignty of God. Things that implement the kingdom of God. Unimpressive things that God can use to do great things.

¹ Ann Jeffries, Kansas City, Kansas. *Christian Reader*. "Lite Fare."

² Cited by R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 275.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2021) Kindle edition.

⁴ A. J. Gordon, *The Bent-Knee Time*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 18.

⁵ John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude." *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 110.

⁶ Peterson, *On Living Well*.