

“Small Beginnings” 7-30-17 CHC

Old Testament, Psalm 119:129-136

New Testament, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53

I remember when our first granddaughter was born. It was a Sunday morning, July 28th, 2002. I was preaching that morning. Word got out that the baby was on the way. Knowing what was happening, members of the congregation told me to leave right after the message and get to Tacoma General Hospital. Worship could finish without me. Fortunately the Associate Pastor agreed. So off Betty and I went.

I remember us all passing the baby around, each of us receiving a chance to hold her. My thoughts turned to the preciousness and vulnerability of new life. From a small seed a life is conceived and emerges from a womb with all the hope, joy, love and faith that accompanies such a life. What kind of a person will she become? What and who will she chose to influence her?

“Each person must decide whether he or she will walk in the light of altruism or in the darkness of destruction” (Martin Luther King, Jr.). We make choices for those things we allow to influence us, be it God, society, or ideas. They have inherent within them the power to shape a large part of the character, quality, and outcome of our lives.

Jesus tells a parable of a mustard seed. From small beginnings it grows large. One observer described a mustard tree which was more than twelve feet high. A common sight in a mustard bush or tree is birds surrounding it. They like the little black seeds of the tree and settle on the tree so that they can eat them.

Like the mustard seed, steps of faith begin small. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it; “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase”. Each step enlarges the heart and spirit as the cumulative effect takes over. Shot and killed April 4th in Memphis, the work King accomplished changed a nation. Many have settled within the branches of his life and thought, taking solace and strength to keep moving forward in causes of justice, non-violence, and love.

Jesus says that “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it becomes the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches”. A picture of an empire in the ancient world was often a tree with the subject nations depicted as birds finding nest and shelter.

As trees symbolize rule, in this case the rule of God’s kingdom, the birds symbolize the oppressed and vulnerable who take refuge in the branches. Throughout the bible we find images of a tree representing God’s kingdom. Propheying the exaltation of fallen Israel the Lord takes a twig off of the top of a cedar and plants it. Let’s listen in on this description found in Ezekiel 17:23; “On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind”.

The kingdom of God starts small, but in the end many nations will be gathered within it. Revelation 15:3-4, along with similar passages in Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Micah, picture the conversion of the pagan nations who become worshippers of the one true God; "All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgements have been revealed".

The kingdom of God is invisible in one sense and hidden in another. Faith perceives it even as it moves stealthily within the world and our hearts. Yet, paradoxically, it has a power, potential and growth beyond comprehension. Jesus is telling us that we are part of something larger than we can imagine, far greater than ourselves, driven not by human genius, effort, or ingenuity. Its origin and sustaining power are in God. The youth sensed that Presence last year at the youth Triennium as they gathered with several thousand others learning about, sharing faith, and worshipping the Living God. So did those of our congregation gathering at Big Tent in St. Louis as they were challenged by God's call to address social injustice, be inspired and worship the God who imparts the Holy Spirit in hearts to join as one in Christ's passion to be a part of His redemptive work in this world.

Paul's wonderful benediction moves to the heart of the reality. Challenging us to know the love of Christ that surpasses any form of human knowledge, filling us with all the fullness of God, Paul can say, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

The head, Jesus Christ, directs the body. The body does not direct the head. We pay attention to what God is doing among us and follow. What does Jesus say to those attracted to his person and teaching? "Follow me". What is God doing among us? Look at the hidden work of the kingdom and follow him there. It is not about what we might individually want for our church. Nor is it about our comfort and asking God to bless what we want to do. God's kingdom is among us and inviting us into its life. It is always about God and what God is doing.

Let's go back to the 18th Century in England. William Wilberforce read a book by Thomas Clarkson exposing the inhumanity of the slave trade. A member of the House of Commons, Wilberforce was discussing the slave trade atrocities with his friend, the future Prime Minister, William Pitt. In the course of the conversation Pitt said, "Wilberforce, why don't you give a notice of a motion on the slave trade?"

What ensued was a lengthy battle to abolish Great Britain's slave trade. Initially his legislation was soundly defeated. Experiencing a conversion to Christianity, Wilberforce desired to leave politics to study theology. His friends persuaded him that he would be more effective doing the work of God by staying in politics and taking on the British slave trade.

He meets John Newton, the former slave captain turned Christian and pastor. Deeply regretful of his past life and its effects on other human beings, Newton becomes a mentor to Wilberforce. Years of failure, feeling his life's work was in vain, having given up hope, crippling pain from chronic colitis, his wife Barbara convinced him to keep fighting. She said that you are the only one willing and able to do this.

It took twenty years, bringing multiple pieces of legislation, before a bill was passed through Parliament in 1807 abolishing the British Slave Trade.

Life is always a process of gaining more or losing more. All throughout life we are moving toward love or away from it. We all can be great. Anybody can serve. It doesn't take a college degree. All a person needs is a heart full of grace. A soul generated by the empowering love of God's kingdom.

And that is what God's kingdom is about. It is a presence of love, a leaven in the dough of life, a transforming presence. How does God's kingdom form and weave amidst the entanglement of weeds and wheat present in the human heart and world? It advances secretly and purposefully. Actively opposed by forces of non-love, "the cosmic powers of this present darkness", the Spirit of God's kingdom works to undo attitudes and actions of oppressive hierarchy, patriarchy, prejudice and injustice. Perhaps more profoundly, it is within those darkest moments that God is up to something, preparing the use of evil for God's ultimate transformative good. Always, in the end, resurrection answers crucifixion, life answers death.

What is God doing and saying to you this morning? Where is God's kingdom Spirit calling you to change? What transformation of mind, attitude and heart is God asking of you? What is God saying to our church? Where do we need to be open to the values, mind, and heart of God's kingdom?

A highly successful seeker church's pastor and Board began grappling with the sharp contrast between the conflicting values of external success and authentic kingdom spiritual formation. They began to be aware that "attracting people to church based on their consumer demands is in direct and irredeemable conflict with inviting people, in Jesus' words, to lose their lives in order to find them", the pastor said. "It slowly began to dawn on us that our method of attracting people was forming them in ways contrary to the ways of Christ" (eReflections, Ruth Haley Barton, July 17, 2017).

God's kingdom at work within often disrupts our daily life and priorities. Jesus says God's kingdom is like a treasure for which we search, setting aside all else. It is the merchant in pursuit of the fine pearl and upon finding it sells everything and buys it.

And so we pray with the Psalmist, "Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your custom toward those who love your name. Keep my steps according to your promise, and never let iniquity have dominion over me" (Psalm 119:132-133).

I pray for my granddaughter, myself, our church, for all of us, that we may engage the mysterious work of God's Spirit in our lives. May all be put aside to find it, allowing the light of that kingdom to form and shape our minds, hearts, and actions amidst the darkness of this world.

