

**“My Father’s Garden, and an Update on the Progress of
The Central Illinois Mammoth Sunflower Crop”**

Sermon notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Mark 4:26-34
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I do not know how seeds grow.

I do not understand how a seed magically splits open and a shoot of green springs forth from within. The shoot goes up. The roots go down. The shoot widens to a stem, and even a trunk. Leaves spring forth, branches, flowers. Something big, green, blue, yellow comes from something small and dead. I don’t know how it happens.

There is a seed coat, the endosperm, the process of germination, the necessity of light, water, and the release of energy and enzymes. The dictionary talks about this. But how it all comes together? For me, a mystery.

For all of us—no matter what we know and don’t know about the mechanics of seeds—the growth of life from a small seed is a wonder. It elicits from many of us songs of praise:

*Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, LORD of love
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!*

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The Kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like a seed. He said it is like a mustard seed.

What is Jesus talking about? What does he mean? It’s a parable. It’s not an abstract or how-to manual. The meaning, we can assume, is deep and wide. Profound. Slippery. Theologically obtuse. Greater, even, than we can fully comprehend.

Perhaps, to some degree, Jesus is talking about himself. Seed. Death. Life. Jesus is describing the parable that is his life, death, resurrection. He will die, be planted in a grave, and spring forth more fully alive than ever. He will rise—rise even to heaven. Small things. Big results.

Perhaps Jesus is just observing in nature a theological truth. From a small seed can come a large plant. Likewise, from a small beginning in a tiny nation of Hebrews can come the in breaking of God’s grace for the whole wide world. Small things. Big results.

Perhaps Jesus means to say that however we talk about the Kingdom of God, what we say and describe and ascribe to is quite small compared to the larger reality of God’s kingdom—the is-ness of that which is.

This text invites us to consider the seeming impotence of small things along side of the vastness of God's Kingdom.

Examples easily come to mind.

Jesus mentions the mustard seed. It is tiny, yet becomes large enough for the birds of the air to find respite.

Three weeks ago I met our sons and Rachel's siblings and parents in MoRanch Presbyterian Conference Center for a family reunion. In the early mornings I'd go for walks. I took lots of pictures of the flowers. The Guadalupe River. The sky. I was particularly enthralled by the butterfly bush. I watched the honey bees and the bumble bees find nectar in the flowers. The butterflies flitted from flower head to flower head. Cardinals found shade. Dragon flies wheeled in and out of branches like those large Chinook helicopters. Humming birds hovered over the blooms and cruised from one sun-dappled branch to the next.

Jesus is right. God is able to bring large things from such small beginnings. How is the Kingdom of God like that? Maybe God provides for creation in ways that seem small and insignificant, but are, in fact, more than ample. One commentator suggests that Jesus is not talking about a king-dom but a kin-dom (think kinship), a place where all kin are welcomed and belong, the sheltering arms of which protect all comers.

Eric tells me that after the terrible twister ripped apart homes in his neighborhood people came out one by one, like ants, surveying the damaging asking if anyone was hurt. It was a small, insignificant beginning to an outpouring of human love and support. Many hands make for light work. Many hands helped and are helping to clean up and restore wholeness and peace.

Whatever else this parable means, Jesus wants us to pay attention to small things. Small things add up. Big things almost always come from small things. God does big things from small beginnings: one manger, one night, one baby messiah. Only a few fish and loaves of bread and yet a whole multitude of 5,000 walk away filled. Examples from scripture abounds. God does big things through small beginnings.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Margaret Mead).

God transforms small things into larger, holy things.

My Father's garden began with rows and rows of tiny seed. Dad worked and worked in that garden. He kept the weeds down. He covered the seedlings with nets to keep the rabbits and birds out. I remember thinking how silly that hot, hard work was. I did not have a vision of what that patch of ground could become. He did. By the middle of the summer, he was feeding the whole neighborhood with cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, snap peas, string beans, Swiss chard, potatoes.

The mammoth Sunflower seeds I planted a month ago did not survive the nibbling of backyard rabbits. Like my dad, I had a vision of what rows of nine-foot sunflowers might look like. I anticipated with joy what those seeds would produce. Unlike my dad, however, I didn't protect the young plants from the hungry rabbits.

Is that what Jesus is hinting at: focus on what is good. Nurture all holy things; don't overlook or underestimate the small things. Treasure God's tender mercies; don't take for granted God's small graces—lest these small things become nibbled or otherwise swept away. Is that part of what Jesus is saying? Take care? Be a good steward of God's seemingly tiny gifts?

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Sometimes small things add up to larger, problematic things.

Even a paper cut if not properly cleaned and cared for can sometimes become more serious. A small irritant can create a life-threatening allergy attack. A drip-drip leak in your roof can ruin the whole ceiling.

The Lebanese movie "The Insult" is about how a trivial, personal conflict explodes into something much larger, a drama that consumes a city and a nation. Two men exchange words about drain that leaks from a balcony into an alley. The man with the leak won't fix it. Words are exchanged. And from this small grudge allowed to grow comes the swinging of a few fists, then an arrest, then a trial, then a verdict, then an appeal to a larger court, then coverage by television crews, then the gathering of heated crowds, then the division of people, religions, races, origins, history, then riots in the streets. The viewer wonders if a new Lebanese Civil War is about to break out.

A.O. Scott for the New York Times praised "the film's honest assessment of the never-ending conflict between decency and cruelty that rages in every nation, neighborhood and heart."

It all started out with a leaky drain. It all started out with a small insult.

Jesus is right. Small things can yield bigger-than-life results, for good and for ill.

Dylan Root harbored tiny seeds of hatred that were allowed to be nurtured and grew. His racism, fueled surely by my racism, our racism, and society's racism, grew to overflow the banks of his human heart. Three years ago today he walked into a Bible study at one of the oldest historic black churches in the nation and he killed the pastor and eight faithful parishioners. Because they were black.

One small man could do such herculean harm. It shattered the nation.

These parishioners of Mother Emmanuel AME Church were teachers and healers. Their pastor, Clementa Pinkney, was a respected state senator. We called them our Charleston Nine and we wore t-shirts picturing nine, white doves flying off a palmetto palm (our state flower) into heaven.

Days after an arrest was made, at a court hearing, Nadine Collier, daughter of murdered 70-year-old Ethel Lance, told the killer, "You took something very precious away from me." She spoke with anguish. "I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again."

And then she said four very small words: "But I forgive you."ⁱ

Nadine Collier's act seemed like such a small thing. *Four words*. But she knew what Jesus knew: Hate isn't the answer. Living in fear isn't the answer. Love is. So, Nadine Collier said what Jesus said on the cross. "I forgive you."

These were the truest, bravest, most unlikely, and difficult words she could possibly have summoned up the courage to utter. But utter them she did. Words like that have the power to transform *everything*.

Those words may seem like such a small thing. Like a mustard seed. But that's where healing begins.

And therein lies the kingdom of God.

AMEN.

Mark 4:26-34 ²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

ⁱ New York Times, Saturday, June 21, 2015.