

August 25, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

Begin Somewhere

Genesis 15:1-6; Matthew 10:1-4

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Through the summer we have been following a series of sermons in which we have been looking together at the teaching of our lord Jesus Christ and the stories that he loved to tell. These are stories that we call parables, stories with a spiritual meaning. There are over 40 of these stories in the pages of scripture, in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus loved to tell the stories. At one point in the gospel (Mark 4:34) it says "without a parable he did not speak to them." He told these stories repeatedly.

- Some of them are long, some of them are short.
- Some of them are easy to understand, some of them are hard to understand.

Sometimes we think of a parable as clarifying everything that there is to say spiritually, but there were times in which Jesus would tell a parable and his disciples would come up to him afterwards and would say something like "We still don't get it Jesus!" They would be scratching their heads: "We don't get it. Please explain, please help us." And Jesus, I think, at that very moment would say, "Ah, I'm glad you asked because in that question, in admitting their ignorance they were interacting with Jesus and through that interaction they were growing in faith. So whether it was easy or hard, long or short Jesus would do anything he could in order to help people grow, to get beneath the surface, beneath the skin and into the heart and into the mind and into the soul so that his word would change people's lives, lives like yours and mine.

- Sometimes Jesus would use exaggerations. He would push a point to an extreme so that people would say "I don't like it, I don't agree with that. What in the world are you doing?" But once again, at the very point that somebody would say that, Jesus I think would smile and say, "Ah, now we're talking!" And that is exactly what Jesus wanted and what I think he still wants.

We come today to the end of our series. There are many more parables we could have chosen, but the summer is over! We may pick on the others at a later date. But today we come to the last of our series. *We are looking together at the "parable of the mustard seed."* Jesus told some parables about relationships, some about nature. This is one of those which are primarily about nature and it's one of the shortest parables that Jesus taught; the parable of the mustard seed. We find it in Matthew, Chapter 13 and at verse 31. And this is how the scripture relates it:

Jesus put before them (that is, before a great crowd that had gathered to hear him) another parable: *'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 in the air come and make nests in its branches.'

First thing, *the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.*

Second thing, *someone took and sowed it in his field.*

Third thing, *it is the smallest of the seeds.*

Fourth thing, *when it is grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.*

And the fifth thing, *the birds in the air can come and make nests in its branches.*

If I were to keep on translating that into our own vernacular, into our own way of thinking I would probably put it something like this. I would say:

. . . When God is your king (remember, Jesus begins, “the *kingdom of heaven* is like a mustard seed)

. . . When God is your king – when your interest is in living your life under the rule of God, within the realm of God and within the community ruled by God the King;

. . . When God is your king, you will find God wanting to teach you even through the smallest of things, even through a mustard seed. You will find that God has a message for you. God always has messages for us. Even through something that starts out small God longs to speak. Even through a mustard seed.

Jesus says this seed is the tiniest of seeds – a statement that is probably one of his deliberate exaggerations (we know that it’s not literally the tiniest of seeds, but it may possibly have been the tiniest seed that people in Jesus’ day would have come to know). Whether literally true or not, everyone listening to Jesus knew that the mustard seed was really, really small! And that, despite its size, when somebody actually takes it and plants it, places it in the ground where it can flourish, you need to watch out: it can grow! Even though it’s just a shrub it can become almost like a tree. And then something wonderful can happen. The birds in the air can come and make their nest in it. The seed become-tree-like-shrub that can be productive, of service, so that others in need can be blessed.

Now that’s Jesus’ story to which some of those who were listening may still have scratched their heads and said, “Jesus we’d like a little more clarification as to what you meant by this. Is this what you are saying?”

- Big things have small beginnings, is that what you are saying?
- Everything has to start somewhere, is that what you are saying?
- Even a rambling mustard bush can do something of value, is that what you are saying?”

And I think that if Jesus heard people saying those kinds of things to him I think he would have said “Yes. Check all of the above!”

To which some people may have said “Well Jesus this sounds awfully like secular wisdom, common-a-garden secular advice. I mean, there doesn’t seem to be anything particularly spiritual about your story.”

To which I think, once again, Jesus would say “Yes, what’s wrong with that?”

In his teaching, Jesus often followed what we call the “Jewish wisdom tradition,” which at times referred directly to God, but frequently made no reference to God at all, but assumed that God’s wisdom was there *for all* people, believers and unbelievers, to find.

The Book of Proverbs is one of these “wisdom books,” what we might call today “a self-help book,” even though it was written a few thousand years ago. And we know that many of the proverbs in it didn’t originate in ancient Israel, but originated in ancient Egypt; came from a secular (at least compared to the God of Abraham) environment.

So some would say this sounds like just plain secular advice. But like all of wisdom in Jesus’ hands, there is no doubt that God does enter into the picture, into the midst of the secular, and God takes it and transforms it in the lives of those who want to live their lives under his rule, within his realm or community – the kingdom of heaven.

When God the king is present it’s especially true: (1) Big things often have small beginnings. (2) Everything has to begin somewhere. (3) Even life that seems like a fairly useless and rambling mustard bush can *do* something and *be* something of value. God can take your life and mine, as small as we may think they are and make something wonderful of them. That I think is the message that Jesus wants to share. And what I would like to do this morning is simply to unpack these statements one by one so that we can think about how they might apply in each of our lives gathered here today. Let’s start with the first.

(1) **Big things, big results come from small beginnings.** This is really important to know, especially if you feel small right now, and I know some of you probably do – as if you’re at a dead end, as if you’re stuck, as if nothing is happening; that you’ve come so far, but now your life is of very little consequence and you don’t know what consequence your life will be from here on in. There are many people who feel this way, and this is a word of God for you: *the mustard seed is a great example of the fact that big things can come from small beginnings.*

That’s certainly how Sonya Carson felt many years ago back in the 1950s and ‘60s. I don’t know if you’ve heard of her, but she was a mother, a single mother in Detroit’s inner city trying to raise a couple of boys. She was receiving government assistance. She worked two or three jobs. She only had a third grade education and it might well have seemed as if her life didn’t add up to anything, as if she was tiny, beyond the scope of God’s interest or passion and with no usefulness to her life. But her boys, ah, well she loved them and she sacrificed her life for those boys and it was because of her that they escaped the cycle of poverty. Curtis, one of her sons became an engineer and the other Ben, the more famous of the two became a pediatric neurosurgeon. He still is to this day a doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital. At age 33 he became director of department of pediatric neurosurgery there. And this is what he said of his mother (In the dedication of his book *Gifted Hands*¹:

*To my mother, Sonya Carson, who basically sacrificed her life
to make certain that my brother and I got a head start.*

She planted seeds. Among the seeds she planted were a couple of phrases which lodged in the boys' hearts and minds.

- *"If you can read you can learn about anything."* If you can read you can learn about anything. And they never forgot it. And she also said
- *"You have to pray. God did not make you to fail."*

Two little mustard seeds. Placed in the hearts and minds of two boys, surrounded by an environment that could have overwhelmed and destroyed them. But those seeds lifted them up and their lives flourished. Very simple, small beginnings, seemingly insignificant, nothing great about her life or words, but a remarkable result. The impact of one life on another, the impact of some words on another, the impact of a character, somebody's way of life on another.

The mustard seed principle works in the ghetto, in the worst of circumstances, and it works elsewhere too. Let's move out of the ghetto into an area which is more familiar to most of us, into the world of education. Think of the impact of teachers on your lives; what you learned both directly and indirectly from teachers and professors.

There were two professors who taught in Atlanta in the 1940s at Morehouse College. One was Benjamin Mays. He was the President. And the other was Dr. George Kelsey, the professor of religion and one of their students at that time was Martin Luther King, Jr. And Martin Luther King, Jr. said it was these two men, apart from his father, these two men who had the most powerful impact on his life; not just *by what they taught*, though it was by what they taught, but because of *who they were*, because of their integration of a passionate faith with a commitment to the intellect. More than anything else, it was the influence of these role models that led him into the ministry and brought together his sense of call, a call that led to a dream, which in turn affected the lives of millions (as we remember on this 50th anniversary of the March on Washington).

(http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_martin_luther_king_jr_biography/.)

Just think of it: two people with this powerful impact! You simply don't know whose life you will impact, what words will stick. BUT we do know that it happens! And that it happens all the time: *small beginnings with a remarkable result*. Big things come from mustard-seed-small beginnings.

(2) What we also know of course is this – that **if you don't begin then nothing will happen**. You've got to begin somewhere, and everyone needs to make that choice as to whether they will begin or not. You've got to take whatever mustard seed God gives to you and it has to be put in the ground, it has to be watered, or it will bear no fruit. That much is guaranteed. Everyone must begin somewhere. It is true in the spiritual life, it's true in the moral life, it's true in society, it's true in the secular world as well in which we live. Even Wal-Mart began somewhere; the largest retailer in the world began somewhere!

Now I need to make a disclaimer here. I am going to mention Wal-Mart. Some people I know like Wal-Mart. Some people love Wal-Mart. Some people hate Wal-Mart. My disclaimer

is that what I am about to share is neither an endorsement of nor a rejection of Wal-Mart!! In fact, whatever you think of Wal-Mart the “Wal-Mart story” remains, remarkable, almost incredible.

Wal-Mart began somewhere. Do you know where Wal-Mart began? In Arkansas, in Bentonville, Arkansas. Some of you will say “Well where is Bentonville, Arkansas?” To which I would reply “It’s not far from Berryville, Arkansas! [LAUGH] To which you might say, “So where is Berryville, Arkansas?” And I’d say “Well I’m glad you asked that question because I went to Berryville, Arkansas just over 20 years ago to the ordination of a friend of mine way up in the Ozarks, and I passed by the small town of Bentonville along the way.” And it was stunning. So small. So (at least for me) far from anywhere! It may not be so stunning now because so many corporate offices have relocated there. But at that time it was just stunning to think of the impact of what happened in, and what emerged from, that one little place.

Some years ago now Sam Walton’s successor, David Glass, was asked to think about one thing that characterized Sam Walton more than anything else. What happened to make him succeed? And I’m sure there are many answers, but his response having known him for 30 years was this. He said without hesitation: “He wasn’t afraid to fail; to start, to mess up and to start again. He says this, clearly unmistakably “At the top of my list I would say Sam was unafraid to fail. Sam would mess something up big time. He’d try something and it would blow up in his face, but when he’d come into the office the next day he’d be laughing like a hyena. And his comment would always be some form of “Well, glad to get that one out of the way. What do we do next?” He started and started and started and started and nothing could stop him from starting again.

(From http://www.tompeters.com/blogs/toms_videos/docs/Excellence_Bias_for_Action.pdf)

If you have a mustard seed you’ve got to do something with it. If you don’t do anything nothing will happen. If you do something with it you have no clue what might happen down the road.

Still thinking in the business world J.P. Morgan who helped create both General Electric and U.S. Steel in the late 1800s and early 1900s once reportedly gave \$25,000 which was a huge amount of money in those days to a man - - from what the man said good advice. I’d like to give you some good advice Mr. Morgan and it will cost you \$25,000. And Mr. Morgan took the risk and he opened an envelope and there were in that envelope just two lines, two lines with the good advice. The good advice read every morning write a list of the things that need to be done that day. Line number two; do them. [LAUGH] Write the list and do them. And apparently he handed over the money.

(From http://www.tompeters.com/blogs/toms_videos/docs/Excellence_Bias_for_Action.pdf)

(3) On the list – for any of us – there will be many things which are seemingly insignificant. I mean that’s what life is like. But if you don’t do them, nothing will happen. Just do it. Get around to it. Just do it. Even if all you have is a bunch of seemingly insignificant mustard seeds

begin somewhere. You'll be amazed at what God will do. How God will enter the picture – just like the loaves and the fishes that Jesus had, God enters the picture, changes the equation, and takes that mustard seed and grows from that mustard seed something unexpected and marvelous, something that (and this is the third point) ***even though the mustard bush may not be pretty, it can become something that will touch the lives of somebody else for good and for God.***

It was over 2,500 years ago that God made a promise, a mustard seed promise to Abraham. We heard about it in our first scripture reading from Genesis 15. To Abraham God says “Listen up Abraham, got something to tell you. I want to bless you and I want to make your life a blessing. I want to bless you and through you I want to bless millions of people around the world through your descendants. I am going to do this.”

And it seemed like a joke. Abraham is old, his wife Sarah is old. They have no children. How can this possibly be? “Through my descendants?” says Abraham, “No! It will not be. All I have is a slave and the son of the slave will inherit” (Gen.15:1-3). Abraham says “No!” But God says “Yes! I will take your lives and through your lives, through your descendants I will bless the world.” And God did it. God did it.

Now I don't know if you really grasp how remarkable that promise was and is – to Abraham 3,500 years ago. Let me try to put it like this. This story would have been told orally for hundreds if not a couple thousand years almost, with little or no evidence that the promise would come true. Then, around 500 BC, scholars estimate the stories that we have in our Old Testament began to come together to form the Bible. So what began as scattered stories are remembered and retold and come together, and do so at a time when the people of Israel, Abraham's descendants, are in exile in Babylon – at a time when it seems as if all is lost, as if their lives as individuals and as a nation, as descendants of Abraham, are going to add up to nothing. And they are absolutely stuck: they can do nothing about their situation.

YET, they have the gall, the nerve, to hold on to this story that they and their descendants will be numerous, a blessing to the whole earth, even when it seems absolutely (to coin a phrase) “inconceivable.”

But the inconceivable happened! This man Abraham and history has influenced more people than just about any person who has ever lived. Indeed, in some ways more than Jesus, because of its impact not only on the Christian world, but on the Jewish and Islamic world as well. Millions and millions of people impacted and blessed, through one solitary “mustard seed of a promise.” One solitary life, like a mustard seed, became a blessing for others in an incredible way. *And we are here today because of him!*

And the same thing is true in a different way with the disciples whom Jesus chose. We read of them in Matthew Chapter 10. If you look through the list twelve disciples, not a super hero among them. Indeed, the reverse! One of them an absolute dud: Judas who betrays Jesus. One of them his best friend, who lets him down and denies that he knows him. And the rest, who run away in his moment of trouble. But these were the ones that Jesus chose to carry the gospel, the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection into this world. *And we are here today because of them.* Without them we would not be here today. Twelve mustard seeds! Twelve mustard

seeds, and a world changed, turned upside down, or downside up, for good and for God. This is how God works.

Jesus put before them another parable, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field (The farmer DID something with it). It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree (or like a tree, at least in) that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (it becomes a blessing for God's creation).

1. Big things often have small beginnings. If we live in a place which seems small, this can be a really good place to be; God loves to be there too.
2. Everything has to begin somewhere. I don't know where it is that you need to start, but write your list of what you have to do today and just do it.
3. And even a rambling mustard seed bush, not that pretty, nice yellow flowers, but not that pretty in the great scheme of things, can become a value to others and to God. In being blessed it can become a blessing. So by the grace of God can your life and mine.

1. Ben Carson and Cecil Murphey, *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1990)

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