

“Small is Good”

Message for June 14, 2009

Jesus was a terrific story teller; his parables not only contained lessons, they were even a little mysterious. I think that just when you feel you understand what Jesus was driving at in any of his stories, it becomes pretty evident soon afterward that there are many possible interpretations (or you aren't ready to learn the lesson), and you may not “get it” at all. By design, Jesus liked to mess with people's minds, and meant for his listeners to ponder the significance of what happened in his stories. Sometimes, his explanations only seem to add to the confusion, but we love his parables because we know Jesus was trying to teach something, and it isn't always obvious.

This past week in Vacation Bible School, we used the story of “The Sower and the Seeds” to give one group of clowns a chance to practice their craft in non-verbal story telling. Our curriculum, which focused on clown ministry, was immersed in Bible stories, so when I chose the passage containing the parable of the mustard seed for today's focal Scripture, it occurred to me that the theme of “smallness” might be a good topic for the message – we could look at the concept a couple of ways - and, as an introduction to this week's sermon, maybe I could share a parable of my own. So here is...

The Parable of the Small Man with the Small Mind

I've never been what you would consider, “small.” I've always been a “big girl” though there was a two-month span of time in the late 70s when I may have been considered “average.” I even have a picture of me in a strapless bathing suit (this would never happen today), that shows me sitting on a tractor/lawn mower like Betty Grable, legs crossed, one hand on the waist and the other in the air – drawing as much attention as possible, winking at the camera. Who was that girl?

During this same two-month period, I was also looking for a man to share my life. I'd just come out of a sad divorce, was in the best shape I'd ever been in, (and like the mustard seed) I had been “planted” by God in a supportive Lutheran community. I felt ready to try again. At 29, it seemed that I was older than other women on the hunt. Since my ex-husband was also my high school sweetheart, I was a little out of the loop in the dating world - and I wasn't a barfly - so I decided I would check out personal ads in the Philadelphia magazine to see what was out there.

Finding dates through the personal ads meant I had to be a little cautious, because after all, I was a single woman going out on my own without a body-guard, to places I'd never been before, with the goal of meeting and dating new men. So, after deciding on the ad that sounded like a good prospect, I would make phone contact first, and then arrange a meeting in a public place like a restaurant or park. If there was any chemistry at all during this initial encounter, we would make a plan to meet again on a real date. Believe it or not, I actually met some really nice men this way and had some great dates, and I became adept at sorting out the phonies from the decent guys – one guy came close to being “the one” (but he's the star of a different parable). And, any time I was asked to describe myself during the phone interview stage, I would use the words “brown hair, hazel eyes, average height and weight” when I described myself – hoping that it would be close enough to the truth.

However, I had one experience that made me feel insecure about myself, which interrupted that growth just a little, and it demonstrates how important communication is between people –in this instance, when it was related to the concept of “small.”

I'd been in phone conversation with a gentleman that felt pretty positive, so one bright Saturday morning, I found myself taking a fairly long drive from Philly to Allentown to meet him at his place of

business. In these phone conversations, I'd learned that he also had brown hair, was of average height and weight, and he owned several Burger King fast food places in Allentown, so I figured at least he was employed – a good start. He told me to sit in a corner booth at 11:00 in his restaurant, and he would find me by my description.

Well, 11:00 came and went, and about five minutes into the overtime, in walked this short man with a serious comb-over. He scanned the room – made direct eye contact with me and scanned some more – made a face that looked like he was annoyed and then he left. A few seconds later, he came back into the room and walked right over to me. “Are you Jane?” he asked. I said, “Yes! You must be Ralph! Hello!” Then, he gave me the once-over and said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear – “Well, you certainly aren't petite like you said you were! I think this is a mistake.”

Now, I'm thinking to myself that this guy told me he was “average with hair,” and on my best day I wouldn't even call myself small much less petite, so I pulled up all the indignant strength I had and told him, “Well, Ralph. Looks like you just missed one great chance at getting to know a great woman. I'm eating at McDonald's from now on.” And I turned on my heel, made a quick exit and drove back to Philly, crying all the way home because I wasn't petite, and Ralph was a slob who didn't have grace enough to just be nice to me today and never call again, like other men.

So, Jane, (you're thinking), what does this have to do with anything?

Remember, this is my attempt to tell a parable like Jesus would, designed to make you to think! Here's one connection...

The reading from Mark speaks of a seed that is thrown out and sprouts overnight – the farmer doesn't really know how or why, but he trusts God's hand is in it somehow. Like that seed, sometimes, we have a tiny vision of who we are and what we want to be, and when we are planted in the ground and surrounded with people who see that in us, nurture us, and tend to our needs, we grow into better people, rise to the expectations, and we deliver. The church I attended provided much of the food I needed to become a whole person, and the good dates I had from my adventures in answering personal ads were probably good because deep down, as a serious daughter of God, I believed in myself, just the way I was. It showed - and the men I met recognized what was worthy in me. Both groups raised me up, in a fashion, and gave me self-esteem and a sense of value. During this time in my life, when a divorce had pretty much knocked me down, I was learning to like myself again, thanks to God's love, and the attention of dear friends and good, decent men. I blossomed and grew...

So when I ran into old Ralph and experienced his small mind and instant, negative and inaccurate judgment about my size, there was a little backslide; my growth halted just a bit. In my mind, I wasn't petite enough for him, and it hurt for a while afterward. I didn't look at personal ads again, thanks to his rudeness, but I did learn what I wouldn't tolerate in a partner (or anyone else, for that matter). The episode wasn't a waste of my time; and like the seed thrown down and left to grow with God's mysterious and tender care, I became someone strong enough to live a full life with the right partner.

Now, let's go back to Mark's story of the mustard seed. In our Scripture today, Jesus tells us that something as tiny as a mustard seed can grow into an amazing tree that provides so much – food and shelter for birds – beautiful leaves for shade – spices for our table. Jesus tells us that with God's

help, “Small can grow into large” – and large then can become “good” – real good. We just have to trust God.

Let’s talk about our church. Did you know as many as sixteen wonderful, generous people of this very small community at FCC put their hearts into our VBS program every single day? When I realized what a gift of time and talent was given by so many people, (and I remembered how it didn’t feel quite like this a year ago), I realized that like the tiny mustard seed, we truly have come past some bad times and are now on our way to bigger and better things for God. God has answered our personal ad – God’s called us, and lifted us up out of our history into the shiny future. We’ve learned to trust God will be there for us, and with careful tending and watering, we’ll grow to be a shelter for the world. After experiencing such a full week, supported by so many of our faithful family, I know we have reclaimed our belief in ourselves and each other – and I’m so thankful to be part of this renewal of Spirit in our church. We’ve shown that a small congregation can do big things – small is good - and this was a week of God’s love in action – just a hint of what we are capable of doing!

The UCC Lectionary for today’s readings adds another layer to thinking about how something small like a seed – or our congregation – can find hope in God’s loving attention. Listen to these comments, and pay particular attention to the questions at the end of this excerpt...

“It’s difficult indeed to know the ways of God, so often hidden from view or not detected (or noticed) by us, but nevertheless at work always and everywhere, bringing about God’s will in unexpected and marvelous ways. There’s so much around us today, as there always has been, that may press us down in spirit. We see war and hatred, prejudice and injustice, hunger and violence, the everyday grind of so many lives, the apparent hopelessness and intractability of some problems and conditions.

There is, of course, much more to the story. We live not so much in optimism that thinks we can fix everything but out of the hope that God is in charge of everything, and we are simply called to participate in what God is doing in the world. That is why we find flashes of brilliant hope and the promise of a greater day to come. They may only be flashes, but they are powerful epiphanies nevertheless. Here and there, in longed-for reconciliation within families and among friends, in healing from illness and grief, in the decisions by a community that places its most vulnerable members at the top of its agenda rather than at the bottom, in sharing and celebration and the release of grudges, in the end of war and the seeking of peace, in the breaking of bread and the nourishment of our souls and our bodies, in giving voice to the voiceless and lifting up the hopes of those in despair, we see the mysterious ways of God.

It may begin, or seem to persist, in smallness, in small steps and small hopes, but the path, Jesus says, leads to greatness, a greatness we cannot see or even imagine today. God can see it, and God can imagine it, and most of all, God intends it. The tiny little seed grows into the greatest of all, the mustard tree, strong and great enough to offer shelter and goodness and the stuff of life for those who need to find a home.

There are so many large and powerful entities that surround us as individuals and as churches. Even our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, seems so small when compared to others.

And yet, and yet. What hope lies beneath statistics and reports, what potential lies in giving voice to the smallest but persistent of witnesses, the early truth-telling of our tradition, the evangelical courage, and the extravagant hospitality that express our commitment and describe our deepest

hopes not only for our church but for the world beyond its walls! “

Now, here are the questions I'd like you to think about...

“As you look at your own life and the life of your church, when were there moments along the way where you could feel God’s hand at work, mysteriously, making choices and offering possibilities that no one would have predicted or thought of on their own? When were you small and perhaps feeling insignificant, and yet, in the end, chosen? Does your church feel small in the community and the world that surrounds you? Do you see the power and strength of your church in numbers, or in the spirit that thrives within it? Can spirit be counted or measured? How can you be the mustard seed that grows and provides shelter and refuge and sustenance to God’s creation and the people of God?”

I'm pretty sure each of us can relate to what this article is saying when we consider the life of this congregation and its meandering path toward this day filled with hope – I know we had times when we felt small and insignificant. But I also know we have been chosen - the very fact that I'm standing in this pulpit, working with you as your pastor speaks for the mystery of how God makes choices and works for us. Who could have predicted this? And, being part of a team who brought a meaningful, God-centered VBS program to 24 or more children each day shows me that even though we are small in numbers right now, God's with us in all we do - and the largeness of our actions at this time tells me that small is good. We are that tiny mustard seed, just beginning to sprout.

I can't wait to see what's going to happen next! God is good – thanks be to God!

Amen.