

From the Pulpit

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“Growing in Grace: Simple and Small”

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-29;

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Daniel J. Clark, Associate Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Baptism of Christ, July 27, 2014, dedicated to Emily Elizabeth Cave on her baptism.

Jesus tells strange stories.

There was once a prince, and he wanted to marry a real Princess. He travelled right around the world to find one, but there was always something wrong. There were plenty of princesses, but whether they were real princesses he had great difficulty in discovering. So at last he had come home again, and he was very sad because he wanted a real princess so badly.

One evening there was a terrible storm; it thundered and lightnined and the rain poured down in torrents; indeed it was a fearful night.

In the middle of the storm somebody knocked at the town gate, and the old King himself sent to open it.

It was a princess who stood outside, but she was in a terrible state from the rain and the storm. The water streamed out of

her hair and her clothes; it ran in at the top of her shoes and out at the heel, but she said that she was a real princess.

“Well we shall soon see if that is true,” thought the old Queen. She went into the bedroom, took all the bedclothes off and laid a pea on the bedstead: then she took twenty mattresses and piled them on top of the pea, and then twenty feather beds on top of the mattresses. This was where the princess was to sleep that night. In the morning they asked her how she slept.

“Oh terribly bad!” said the princess. “I have hardly closed my eyes the whole night! Heaven knows what was in the bed. I seemed to be lying upon some hard thing, and my whole body is black and blue this morning. It is terrible.”

They saw at once that she must be a real princess when she had felt the pea through twenty mattresses and twenty feather beds. Nobody but a real princess could be so delicate.

Jesus tells strange stories. Now, of course Jesus didn't tell that story. Hans Christian Andersen published this story of the princess and the pea about 180 years ago. In this story we hear of a very very small thing that made a very very big difference. 1800 years before this strange story, Jesus too

told a couple strange stories where, similarly, very very small things make very very big differences.

In Jesus's strange little stories called parables, he uses ordinary, homey images and everyday people and activities, with sometimes a dose of mystery or a dash of dark comedy as tools to convey how one experiences the realm and rule of a loving God. And in these parables, we see the truth and beauty and goodness of God and life in God's world in very very small things. There's not a pea, like in Hans Christian Andersen's story, but there is a small seed and a little yeast. In a culture where bigger is always better, we are faced with the radically countercultural view that size... doesn't.... matter.

Just in case you've been bit by the bigger-is-better bug, consider these observations... Have you ever tried to eat a spoonful of cinnamon or take a bite of a raw garlic clove? Have you ever had a rock in your shoe or a splinter in your foot? If you think small things don't matter – riddle me this – have you ever been barefoot and stepped on a lego?!?

“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 of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

A mustard seed is tiny. But, much like mint in our soil and climate, it basically becomes a ground cover. If you grow mint in your gardens or flowerbeds, you know that it can take over and sometimes it just needs to be knocked down with a lawnmower or weed wacker to keep the herb under control. Mustard is this way.

But this story is trickier than just a small seed and a big plant. The Jews that Jesus was speaking to would have *never* planted mustard. It grew everywhere and was available without cultivation. And mustard never grows into a tree, Jesus employs hyperbole – painting a striking picture with larger-than-life language. Mustard is little and wild – little and wild like that child that left the lego out that I stepped on when I learned the lesson that small things can make a big impact.

So, is that what Jesus is saying here? That the realm and way of God – is little and wild and you don't even have to plant it for it to grow – and even when it's small, it makes a big impact? Maybe so... and more.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Yeast, it turns out, is also tiny and wild and carries a larger-than-life impact. In those days, yeast wasn't a dry packet bought in a store, like the yeast I use when I make pizza dough at home with the kids. For Jesus and the people he was speaking to, leaven was a piece of bread left in a warm, dark, moist place that would eventually turn into some mysterious substance that ancient people used to make bread rise. For Jesus and the people he was speaking to, leaven was also a symbol of impurities and it was removed from a faithful house by the religious rule-followers in order to prepare for holy days.

With the mustard seed, we learned that the realm and way of God is little and wild and you don't even have to plant it for it to grow – and even when it's small, it makes a big impact. Here with the leaven, perhaps we are learning that the realm and way of God is something that grows mysterious in hidden places and that the rule followers might reject it, and like mustard, it's small yet makes a big impact. In both cases, we are taken by surprise at the mysterious work of God in our ordinary, everyday world.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, *“In the most ordinary, everyday things and experiences are signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullness of our days. It is possible that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives.”*

Have you ever tried to eat a spoonful of cinnamon? Have you ever had a rock in your shoe? Have you ever stepped on a lego? Did you know a little mustard bush takes over a whole garden? Have you seen that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

A little does a lot. A few words from the mouth of Jesus grow over space and time into something vast in its impact, importance, and implications. A little does a lot. Even little words matter. We probably all know that a four letter word can change the tone and direction of a conversation. Do we also realize that a four letter word can change the world... love? A little love does a lot.

Jesus ends his series of vignettes in Matthew 13 by asking his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” That’s such a funny question – especially when you know the story and know these disciples. It’s a funny question – especially when I’m honest about doubts and questions and that I actually don’t understand *all* this. How could I?!? Jesus asks his disciples if they understand everything and they say “yes”. Really?!? Well, in fitting with the theme, maybe understanding a little can mean a lot. Maybe understanding just enough of God’s love means we understand more than enough.

Amen.

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