

“The Power of Small”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
I Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34

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The title of this morning’s sermon could just as easily fit with next week’s Hebrew Scripture – the story of David versus Goliath. Yet, we will need to wait to discover just how large Goliath was and in fact, that David’s height is not revealed.

This morning, we have David’s anointing as Israel’s second king. We recall God called the people of Israel together under the guidance of Abraham and Sarah, and after a time of slavery in Egypt, Moses guided their Exodus to the edge of the promised land, which they would enter under Joshua. Israel then lived 200 years without a king, under an effective system of judges and regional rule, but then wanted to be like other nations and have a king. God finally relented and Saul was chosen. This morning’s lesson is based in God’s displeasure with Saul, even while he was still alive and sending chief priest Samuel to find the next king in the house of Jesse. Let’s hear our reading in I Samuel 16.

I Samuel 16:1,4-13

God said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” Samuel did what God commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” Samuel replied,

“Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to God; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.”

And Samuel sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When the sons came, Samuel looked on Eliab and thought,

“Surely this must be God’s anointed.”

But God said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel, who said,

“Neither has God chosen this one.”

Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said,

“Neither has God chosen this one.”

Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse,

“God has not chosen any of these. ... “Are all your sons here?”

And Jesse said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.”

“Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”

Jesse sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. God said to Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”

Then I took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of God came mightily upon David from that day forward.

As we consider the power of small this morning, our focus will not be on youngest son David, whom Samuel anointed as the God-appointed successor of Saul, but on Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed and another that precedes it in Mark 4. Linked with the mustard seed, is a parable unique to Mark’s Gospel – the parable of the growing seed, about a harvest that occurs automatically. The parables of the growing seed and mustard seed, are the only two in Mark that begin with the phrase, “The kingdom of God is like...” Let us hear these two kingdom parables in Mark 4:26-34:

Jesus ... said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

Jesus also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet 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.’

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

[hymn]

When I titled this sermon “The Power of Small,” there was a temptation to take on that old Randy Newman song about Short People! Yet, I will let that go, understanding it would be, in part, a personal thing.

I also thought of the power of small in a generational way, as a child of the 60’s, who resonated with E. F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful, whose first three cars were Volkswagen Beetles, and who followed the ideal, “Live simply so others can simply live.” Schumacher’s book promoted the notion of simplicity as being better for both human anxieties and the earth’s resources.

Yet, I also admit I am geared toward efficiency and economy. I am the first to research the best price when making purchases. I don’t promote the idea that bigger is better, but I may fall for it in practice and price, and justify it by deciding which store or company is the better bigger.

Wal-Mart is often the focus of any discussion of big versus small, particularly in New England. Just read the reactions when it seeks to build in a small town. I have heard people say they prefer Target over Wal-Mart if they are going to buy big and presumably cheap. Likewise, with big box home improvement stores, some prefer Lowe’s and others Home Depot.

What you may or may not know is in the pairs of stores just mentioned, two began as small, and two were conceived as big. In 1950, Sam Walton began Walton’s five and dime in Bentonville, Arkansas, and then grew and expanded his harvest of stores. By contrast, the Dayton Corporation created Target to be a superstore in the 1960’s.

In 1921, L. S. Lowe opened a hardware store in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, then opened several other local stores before the national expansion in the 1970’s. By contrast, Home Depot was conceived in 1978 as a big box home improvement store.

So, we discover some of what is big today was once small and simple, and then sprouted and grew, while others began their life being big. The same is somewhat true for churches, for some begin as small and become big, while megachurches often begin with the expectation and concept of bigness.

I think there remains a certain power of small that may be beyond the grasp of big. We know it as intimacy, as friendship, as being a name and not a number. Still, this power of small competes with the lure of big. We are to decide: lower price or personal service; one-stop shopping or multiple stops; fully stocked national chain versus limited local owner inventory.

In the world of big, small is often considered admirable but not practical. In the world of big, the goal is to allow a shopper to go in, find everything easily, and be checked out quickly. Thus, store layouts are the same in California, Missouri, and Eastern Massachusetts. In a small store you may have to ask where to find something, and end up taking time to visit with someone.

I expect others may also struggle with the pull of efficiency and economy offered by the big, versus the familiarity and intimacy offered by the small. And these days internet sales add another dimension to our decisions. I don’t think our parables will solve our spending struggles, but they can be instructive for our lives, and particularly for our life together as a church.

The Kingdom of God is like...a seemingly simple phrase yet as vast as God's self. The first of the two parables this morning ushers us into this vastness. A person scatters seed, then proceeds to follow normal days and nights of rising and shining, dining and reclining. No attention is paid to the sown seed – no watering, no hoeing, no fertilizing, no pesticing. One day, glancing outside, the sower sees the seed has sprouted and grown, but the sower "...knows not how."

Seeds have always been an incredible mystery and delight. The planting of a bean seed by a child in Sunday school one week, will, by the next Sunday, have emerged from the soil. When the child asks how it happened, it may be best to suspend the botany lesson and simply share in the wonder of the child, with an exclamation rather than an explanation. "Isn't it incredible?" may be all that is needed.

Jesus says, "The earth produces of itself." The Greek word is *automatos* – the root of our word, automatically – the earth produces automatically, by itself, not by human manipulation. So first and foremost, God oversees the earth's production, though there is human involvement, for the seed needs to be scattered, spread, sown.

In these parables, the seed is the Word of God, but it is not the only seed being sown in the world's fields. Politically, the small seed of the word of God was up against the imperial seed of the word of Caesar. The mustard seed was the image of a movement that had the power of small to take on the dominant culture. It is a reminder the church has needed to hear throughout all its generations: to let empires know of another kingdom by diligently scattering the seed of the Word; and to let cultures that exclude know of a God who welcomes all.

As a church, we experience what is common these days. While our membership number has been steady over the past several years, we realize there are some on the roll who have not been here for years. Even if we recognize the vitality of a congregation is not in its stated number of members, but in its worship attendance, statistics indicate a worship decline of almost 30% for this congregation over the past ten years. Such news often elicits panicky responses, though we tend not to actually use the word "panic," since it does not seem to be a word the faithful use.

Church panic is manifest in different forms. For some it is the less than helpful attempt to lay blame on a person, often a pastor, or a decision, normally made by a session. "If only _____ [fill in the blank], then we would be better off today." For others, the panic causes a look back at what worked in the past, with the assumption it will work today. For still others, it is a strategizing of what we can do to grow the church, often centered on bringing in young families, and finding a pastor who can do so. I have found such panicky responses in many congregations, and what I have also almost always discovered is the panicky response has an underlying theme of survival rather than vision.

We would never greet children in Sunday school by saying, “Good morning, boys and girls. I am glad you are here. I just wish there were more of you.” Yet, even without words, people sense panic, and anxiety, and fears about survival without vision. At such times, I believe it is helpful to consider the power of small, though in reality, a congregation with 180 members and 85 in weekly worship is medium-sized in New England. Still, my eye was drawn to the cover of the June issue of Presbyterians Today magazine, which stated, “Small Churches, Big Impact.” One article was written by David Rohrer, a minister who had moved 10 miles, from being an associate pastor in a 4,000 member congregation, to being a solo pastor of a 100 member congregation. That’s fortyfold... the reverse way.

Among the many insights he offered, one short sentence jumped out at me: “I’m grateful to be serving in a church that is not anxious about what it isn’t.” [David Rohrer, “Strength in Small Numbers,” Presbyterians Today, June 2015, p. 32]

“I’m grateful to be serving in a church that is not anxious about what it isn’t.” I find similar advice to find hope in what is, not what isn’t, in the call and anointing of David, when Samuel is told by God, “I am not concerned with stature, for I do not look at outward appearance as mortals do, but I look on the heart.”

The seed parables add more rays of hope, as they both encourage action and counsel patience. Jesus does not say be small like a mustard seed, but the Kingdom of God is like the mustard seed – if you plant the small seed, if you spread the good news, it will be grown by God. There is a sense of freedom in knowing we are not in charge of knowing how or why growth happens, and we can relinquish growth to God once the seed is scattered. That is not to say we have no part, as I would simply remind Jesus told us not to hide our light under a bushel.

The parables invite our imaginations on a mysterious journey to discover the heart of who we are as a congregation, to celebrate the richness and uniqueness of the seed we have been entrusted by God to sow, and then to not be shy about scattering it with abandon and hope.