

SMALL SEEDS

Mark 4:26-34

Kelly Boyte Brill

Avon Lake UCC

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There is a church in the suburbs. In some ways, it is typical of a mainline Protestant church. For most of the year, there are two worship services. At one worship service people sing hymns and there's a choir wearing robes. At the other worship service there's a worship band and people sing worship songs with the lyrics projected onto a screen. That's not at all unusual for larger mainline Protestant churches.

In some ways, it's a church that looks comfortable. It's well-maintained, outside and in. In some ways, it looks like a church for comfortable people.

Inside this church, Sunday after Sunday, people gather to sing, to pray, and to hear stories. Some of them are unusual stories, many of them actually are unusual stories. If they're stories of heroes, they're not typical heroes. Many of the people in these stories are flawed people, broken people, but people who are used by God nonetheless. Inside this church, week after week, the name that is mentioned most is the name of Jesus. His life is held up as an example. He is a person who surrounded himself with a motley crew of followers, some of them blue-collar workers like fishermen, some of them among the most despised like tax collectors. In a time when women were considered not just second-class citizens but literally the property of men, Jesus freely associated with women. He paid attention to children. He touched those who were unclean. He stopped for beggars. He had meals in the homes of religious

authorities. Everywhere he went, he defied expectations. He created around him a community of people who otherwise would never have associated with each other.

And he told stories. At this church those stories are told and re-told. Stories that make no sense according to the rules of modern living, stories that don't fit with the narrative of capitalism and upward mobility. Yet people find themselves drawn to these stories. In one story, people who work all day get paid a fair wage, and yet people who only work an hour get paid the same wage. In another story, a father has two sons. One son wastes his father's inheritance, the other stays home and works hard. Yet when the wasteful son comes home, his father throws him a party.

Week after week, Sunday after Sunday, these stories are told.

Children learn them in Sunday School. Adults discuss them in Bible Study. Little by little, these stories begin to work their way into people's hearts and minds, as do the teachings of Jesus. "If someone needs a coat, give it to them. If they ask you to walk with them, walk an extra mile, too." None of it makes sense, not if you study political science or economics, but there is something about this person Jesus and the way he lived.

So the people who hear these stories and these teachings find themselves making decisions that sometimes surprise them.

At the grocery store on Saturday, a family buys extra food. This week they're not only cooking for themselves. One night, they're also cooking for the families that are spending the week at their church, people who have found themselves homeless, people who look remarkably like their own neighbors.

A man has to put in his request for vacation time at work six months in advance. He only gets three weeks' vacation but he talks it over with the family and says, "I'd like to spend one of those weeks chaperoning the youth group mission trip."

The woman is tired; she hasn't been feeling great herself, but instead of napping, she goes to the nursing home. She's a Stephen Minister, and she knows that the woman she visits looks forward all week to the hour they will spend together.

There's a family who comes to worship every Sunday. Well, the husband doesn't come when there's a home Browns game but he and the pastor have worked out a deal about that. They have two daughters, twins, who are raised in this church, and the girls are here every week. It's what they do. It's who they are. And that weekly practice shapes them.

There's something about this person Jesus and the way he lived that changes lives.

I want to tell you about a week in the life of this church. A real week. Two things happened simultaneously on a Thursday afternoon. At 1 PM. I received an email from Love Inc. Love Inc. is a helping agency in Lorain County; we partner with them in the Clothe a Kid program. People from all over the county contact them for help. They send out a weekly email with updates and prayer concerns. A week ago Thursday this was the request:

"Dear Prayer Partners, A single father and his teenage daughter experienced the total loss of their home due to an electrical fire in mid-May. A new apartment has been established and the client is working a new job, with limited income and no transportation. Basic small kitchen items and appliances are needed to prepare and eat

meals. Linens, blankets, and clothing are needed for daily activity. A table, chairs, couch, and beds are needed to be comfortable while living and sleeping in their apartment.

Please pray for an overwhelming response from the community to help comfort and provide for this family in their time of need. Pray that the daughter overcomes post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety.”

Now one church can't meet every need, of course, but when I received that email, I thought, “That's something we can help with.”

A few emails and phone calls later, and the father was shopping at our Good Neighbor Thrift Shop. We gave him \$250.00 worth of household items and clothing.

While I was responding to that email, Valerie told me that I had a call from a woman whose 35-year-old son had just died. The woman is an Avon Lake resident. Her son had been baptized at a UCC church in another community. Could we help? Yes, of course, we could help. Could we have the funeral on Saturday? Less than 48 hours from now? I admit that I paused. And then I said yes.

The family came in that afternoon to meet with me. I confessed to them that I had said yes to them hastily but that there was a problem with their funeral plans. The sanctuary was available for a funeral, but the Fellowship Hall, where they wanted to have lunch afterwards, was set up for our Family Promise program. I showed them around. I said, “I'm sorry but we can't move these room dividers. These are temporary homes for our guests this week and they have to stay.” The mother said to me, “That's all right; my son was once homeless.”

Wayne Eastman helped me with the service, and we offered this church that day to a group of people who came seeking comfort and a place to share their grief. There were more tattoos in this room than there were people who knew the Lord's Prayer. Wayne and I both commented on the spirit of God that was present, palpable.

On Monday morning, three days later, we received word that Tim Thomas had died. When he died, his two daughters were both away on mission trips: Taylor in Haiti, Nicole on her way to New Orleans. The seeds that had been planted in them in that weekly practice of their faith, the summers at church camp, the years in youth group - those seeds are growing, and they have shaped the values and the lives of those young women. As word spread of Tim's death, I began communicating with a huge contingent of our church that was on their way to New Orleans with Nicole. In less than an hour, a plane ticket had been purchased for her, a companion was flying home with her and then back to New Orleans, prayers were being said, and people were calling me asking, "What does Janet need?" "Who's bringing meals?" "What can we do?" I spent the entire day Monday communicating with members of this congregation as word spread.

As sad as I was, and continue to be, about the loss of Tim, I was at the same time moved by the compassion and the connections in this church family. It is my deep desire that everyone who is a part of this community would feel that sense of connection. It comes when we worship together, week after week. It comes when we work side by side. It comes when we form relationships and spend time socializing with one another. It comes when we give of time, talent and treasure and realize that those gifts are making a powerful difference for good.

It is an experience of the Kingdom of God, or what you might call the Reign of God. It is the experience of the power of God, the spirit of Jesus, in our midst.

Jesus tried, in dozens of parables, to describe what that experience is like. It's like a party, he said, where all kinds of people are invited. And it's like seeds that grow, and it's like a mustard seed, so tiny that when you plant it, you can barely see what you're planting.

Why did Jesus tell a story about a mustard seed? Is it to show us that small acts of love can make a difference? Because not all of us will live heroic lives. Not all of us will leave behind millions of dollars or headlines in the newspaper. But all of us are called to small acts of faithfulness, tiny ones sometimes, so small you wonder if anyone notices them. You know what they are. Teaching Sunday School. Shoveling the neighbor's sidewalk. Counting the offering. Showing up at choir practice, every single Wednesday night. Increasing your pledge, a little at a time, year after year. Telling your teenagers to come to church, even though they don't want to get up, and setting an example by coming yourself. Befriending the new kid at school, even though he's weird. In all these small ways the reign of God is experienced. And that is why Jesus tells this parable.

But there's another reason, too. The mustard plant can grow to be something wild and crazy and uncontrollable. Here's what one gardener has to say about growing mustard: "It appears uninvited, but it withstands pretty hard frosts. A single mustard plant will continue to duplicate, over and over. The biggest problem mustard plants pose is that, once they get going, they can spread everywhere." The spirit of God might plant something in our church that is a little messy, a little out of control. If we keep on

saying, "All people are welcome," some people might take us up on that. The spirit of God isn't always neat and tidy. That's why Jesus tells this parable.

What happens when the good news of Jesus starts spreading? What if the people who come here for a funeral start showing up on Sunday morning?

What if our own lives become disrupted, by this plant that keeps growing, that shows up everywhere, that changes the well-planned orderly course of our lives?

A church in downtown Atlanta, not far from the state capitol, began a ministry for the homeless, and after a while, some of the street people began to join the congregation. You can imagine the discomfort, and all of the conversations that took place. It's one thing to provide charity to people. It's another thing to worship with them in the same pew. On Ash Wednesday, the pastor set up a worship station on the sidewalk. She decided to offer a brief worship service, followed by ashes and blessings to anyone. About 60 homeless people showed up. So did about 40 state legislators. These 100 people were standing shoulder to shoulder. And then they were putting crosses on each other's foreheads, a homeless person dipping his thumb in the ashes, marking the forehead of a state senator. And then the state senator, dipping his thumb in the ashes, marking the forehead of his fellow citizen, a man who happens to be homeless.

An experience of the reign of God. Seeds planted, seeds grown, Jesus in the midst of it. Let us pray.