

ON THE GROWING EDGE...

1) “Exceeding All Expectations!”

Ezekiel 17: 22-24 / Matthew 13: 31-32

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October 11, 2015

What you see is not necessarily what you get!

There are, of course, many ways of trying to describe the essential meaning of the parable that Jesus told in our lesson from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Using his unique story telling ability, Jesus suggested to his listeners that the kingdom of heaven that he had come to proclaim was like the smallest of seeds that, when planted, would become the largest of shrubs—a tree in which the birds of the air would come and nest in its branches.

There it is in a nutshell—better yet, a mustard seed! Who could have imagined such a thing? Certainly not Jesus’ listeners. They expected the kingdom of heaven to arrive in ways that were big and bold and impressive! They expected marching bands and fireworks and massive crowds!

The Messiah would bear a striking resemblance to mighty King David and he would, like David, restore Israel to its pinnacle of power and prominence. There was no time for subtlety or nuance. This was something that demanded dramatic action!

Imagine their surprise, therefore, when Jesus, an obscure itinerant preacher from the hill country of Galilee came, not boldly or impressively, but quietly and without fanfare to announce that the kingdom of heaven had already arrived! Say what?!!

Not only that, but he had the audacity to suggest that this was all by design—a design glimpsed centuries before by the prophet, Ezekiel who proclaimed that God would take a twig from the top of a mighty cedar and plant that twig on top of a mountain—Israel’s mountain. And from this planting, there would grow a noble Cedar whose boughs would bear fruit and the birds of the air would nest within its branches.

This, of course, was in direct contrast to everything that the people of Israel had been expecting...everything that they had been hoping for. And I suspect that it is also in direct contrast to so many of our own expectations and hopes when it comes to the ways in which God chooses to be at work in our world. We are, after all, only human. And human beings tend to be cut out of the same cloth when it comes our hope for the big, the bold and the dramatic. There’s even a slogan that seems to capture the essence of this thinking. It is one often used by various sports teams as a way of ramping themselves up for the competition ahead. “Go Big...or go home!” the saying goes and it is somehow emblematic of our human understanding.

Big is impressive! Big gets our attention! Big is often the indication of significance! And if God is at work, then, obviously, God will choose to act in big, bold and dramatic ways.

Would you agree—at least, from the perspective of our culture? While this may, in fact, be the impression of many, just remember this—**what you see is not necessarily what you get!** This is, in essence, what Jesus is saying to his listeners in our gospel lesson. He is making the outrageous suggestion that the way God chooses to act—the way God’s kingdom actually arrives, is not necessarily in big ways...or bold ways...or dramatic ways. In fact, says Jesus, God often acts in ways that are hardly even detectable at the time...not in macroscopic ways, but in microscopic ways.

If you have ever seen a mustard seed, you get a good sense of Jesus’ microscopic intentions. A mustard seed is indeed, one of the smallest of seeds and yet, by the grace of God who works behind the scenes in unconventional and unexpected ways, the tiny seed that is planted holds the potential to become something far larger, far greater than anything that we might have imagined or thought possible.

This, says Jesus, is the way God’s kingdom arrives—in ways that defy expectations...ways that boggle imaginations...ways that astound, amaze and astonish. Jesus, of course, is describing the nature of the kingdom of heaven (God), but this description also applies, I believe, to that kingdom as it emerges within the life of the community of faith that we share as the Church.

We, of course, are not immune to the expectation of a culture that tends to equate significance and importance with size. If you are not so sure about that, think, for a moment about the “Mega Church” movement and the assumption often made that bigger is better and that more is best.

This is not to suggest that God doesn’t work or the Spirit doesn’t move in the Mega Church model. No, it is merely to suggest that there is danger in assuming that this is the only way or even the most important way that God’s Spirit chooses to act.

Given the wisdom of Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, it seems to me that if we are really interested in understanding how and when and where the Spirit of God is at work in our lives and our life together, we would do well to pay attention to the little moments...the seemingly insignificant moments in which the tiny seeds of love, compassion, kindness and service are sown. For these tiny seeds, by the grace of God, hold the potential to grow into something that we, even in our wildest imagination, cannot begin to grasp.

This morning marks the beginning of our fall stewardship campaign—an announcement that, I recognize, may not be greeted with universal joy. But even so, I think you will understand just why these next several weeks will prove to be a very critical time in our life as a community of faith. For the simple truth of the matter is this: It is not easy to be the Church in the year 2015. Many churches are in decline and a number of churches are closing their doors. Cultural shifts, changing habits and busy schedules have rendered the Church, at least in the minds of some, as irrelevant and outdated.

I understand that this is, increasingly, the perception of our culture. The problem is that I simply don't believe that it is true. In spite of the fact that "organized religion" has a huge image problem, I don't believe we are irrelevant and I don't believe that we are outdated.

In fact, I believe that now, more than ever, there is a spiritual vacuum in our culture—one that is just waiting to be filled by the presence of faith communities that are open, progressive, inclusive, ecologically sensitive and deeply committed to the work of compassion and justice. In other words, communities like us!

There is a question that has often been asked at seminars that I have attended. "If your church burned down tonight, would anyone in your community notice? And if so, what would they miss?"

I believe that our community would notice and that they would feel the void and the absence of our witness in a variety of ways.

The real challenge we that we face is the challenge of continuing to live on the growing edge of our faith. While it may be tempting to become complacent, to sit back and settle into the comfort zone of the way things are, I think we all realize that this would be a mistake—one that we cannot afford. The Law of Inertia tells us as much. "A body at rest tends to stay at rest and a body in motion tends to stay in motion."

It take energy and effort to stay in motion. It takes focus and discipline to keep moving forward. It take conviction and commitment to stay on the growing edge.

Over the next several weeks, you will be hearing about the various ways in which we, as a congregation, are choosing to live on the growing edge. You will be hearing about the seeds that have been sown in our past and the ways in which they have grown in fruitful and unexpected ministries of the present. You will also hear about the seeds that we are planting now in anticipation of the fruit they will provide for generations yet to come.

While it is a challenging time to be the Church, I believe that it is also, a very exciting time. We have been blessed in ways beyond counting with the combination of creative people, generous resources and a worthy vision. We have the unique opportunity to be the Church that our culture has concluded no longer exists.

It will take time and it will take patience. It will take our clear commitment and our deep investment, but I have no doubt that we, by the grace of God, can plant the seeds of faith that, when watered and nurtured by our care, will grow to become the large shrubs and trees of the great forest that is the kingdom of God.

This is precisely why this financial campaign matters. We have great and important work to do, but we can only do it through the investment we make together. What you see, after all, is not necessarily what you get.

What we may be inclined to see as small and insignificant, can be used by the Spirit of God in ways that amaze and astound and astonish...ways that exceed our expectations and challenge our imaginations.

Could there be a better time...a more important time to be the Church?! I don't believe so.
Amen.