

Rick Snyder
First Presbyterian Church
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The Hope and Promise of Tiny Seeds

Matthew 13:31-34

A few weeks ago I was blessed to cradle a newborn infant in my arms. As I held her, I was awed by her perfectly formed fingers and toes, by the delicate creases of her ears, and by how she instinctively gripped my finger. And as I thought of the possibilities that lie ahead – school, college, a career, perhaps becoming a mother herself, I thought of Dr. Seuss' tale, "Oh the places you'll go,"

Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to great places! You're off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose . . .

And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98-3/4% guaranteed).

Kid, you'll move mountains. So . . . be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or

Bray or O'Shea. You're off to Great Places. Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So . . . get on your way.

We human beings are such miracles, as Scripture says, "Just a little lower than the angels," but we begin our journey as a tiny fertilized egg smaller than a centimeter.

So as the prophet Zechariah tells Israel, during a low time in her history, "Do not despise small beginnings." A tiny fertilized egg grows to become a human being. An acorn becomes a mighty oak; an empty field in March teems with a ripe harvest by September; a few tomato plants can fill our dinner plates for weeks when the plants mature.

Many wondrous things start small. Once an aspiring, but discouraged cartoonist saw a mouse sniffing around his tiny apartment. He sketched the mouse, thought up names and stories about him, and named his fictional mouse, "Mickey!" And eventually Walt Disney becomes a household name! An idea hatched in a run-down, efficiency apartment leads to the splendor of Disney Land, Disney World, and entertainment for millions.

Last summer I had the privilege of returning to McHenry, in the Chicago suburbs, to preach at their 50th anniversary celebration. The church held its first worship service in July, 1959. Twelve persons attended. The next day two of them took the first offering down to the local bank to open an account. The bank president was so excited about this new church that he summoned his entire management team in for the conversation. Finally he asked, "And how much do you wish to deposit?" The answer, "\$16.24!"

Many wondrous things start small, which is the theme of our text this morning. Jesus is describing the Kingdom of God, the realm or sphere of God's activity. The kingdom is like

a field where some seeds fall on hard soil and quickly die, where some seeds sprout quickly, but then wither because they do not take root, where some seeds get choked out by what Jesus calls "worries and greed." But the seed, which is the word of God, takes root in some hearts and the harvest is beyond comprehension, 30, 60 and a hundredfold.

Or Jesus says, "The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed, eight hundred of which weigh but a gram, which a man plants in his garden. Though tiny, one seed produces a 12 foot shrub which protects the birds of the air from predators." Or "the kingdom is like a measure of yeast which a woman mixes into her dough. It works its way through the dough and the dough nearly fills the kitchen, producing a feast that can feed hundreds."

Jesus' contemporaries expect God's kingdom to come with drama and fireworks, heralded by a Messiah who will split the heavens and send Roman legions limping back to Rome. They expect the Messiah to say, "Grab your swords, let's go fight!" They don't expect their Messiah to say, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," or that He will use the image of leaven from a woman's kitchen. They don't expect a kingdom that grows quietly, behind the scenes. But God's ways are not our ways.

Jesus is saying, "Do not be discouraged by small beginnings or overwhelming odds." God does His best work in God-forsaken places. A band of slaves wither under the yoke of a Pharaoh who crushes them with harsh labor. A group of exiles limp back to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity, back to a burned out city and weed-filled fields. A young, unmarried couple can't find shelter, and the peasant woman named Mary gives birth to her first-born in a stable. Can God really be at work in such dire circumstances?

William Wilberforce was the privileged son of a wealthy merchant. Educated at Cambridge, he was elected to parliament at 21, and was a lover of leisurely European vacations. But one day he read a pamphlet by Quaker Thomas Clarkson describing the horrors of the slave trade. Within thirty minutes, his life changed. By 1789, at the age of thirty, he lobbied to ban the slave trade. His critics sneered, crying, "It's about the economy, stupid! Without slaves, our economy will collapse!" But Wilberforce kept speaking, cajoling, praying and fighting. Over and over his bills were crushed. But, sustained by a mustard seed-sized faith, he kept on. And in August, 1833, after a struggle of forty years, Parliament banned the slave trade, one month after Wilberforce died.

Jesus is saying, "Do not be discouraged by small beginnings or overwhelming odds. Look not at the size of your faith, but at the size of God. Don't say, "It's only an idea. Everything worthwhile begins as `only an idea.'" So we don't underestimate small gestures. Perhaps it's only a word of encouragement, or a simple "Thank You," or a few moments in prayer, or a phone call made to an old friend. Who knows? Simple gestures can make all the difference. Small acorns can become mighty oaks!

But the growth takes time. Mustard trees don't grow overnight. Babies take nine months to make an entrance, and then many years to become an adult. And in the meantime, we

face the terrible twos, the trying tween years, teen-aged drivers and then terrifying tuition payments. But seeds do grow; acorns become oaks; when the soil is fertile, the harvest can be far beyond our expectation.

I believe it is worthwhile to reflect on this parable of the mustard seed on the day of our annual meeting. Thinking back on 2009 we can give thanks for many things. The combined average attendance at our two campuses was strong, well over 500 per Sunday. Our giving was up over 2008, and I know of very few churches during this time of economic uncertainty where that is true. We now have 26 small groups, circles or Bible Studies meeting with over 260 participants. Ministries like our Community Mission Deacons, Care Deacons, the Stephen Ministry, and our Commissioned Lay Deacons who share hospital calling are flourishing.

Last Spring we raised nearly \$60,000 in our mission marathon to provide invaluable assistance to both local agencies and community and global mission. In September, thirteen of us had the experience of a lifetime, visiting Malawi, helping to establish a sister church relationship in the rural village of Lisanjala. You have supported this ministry and the building of a school/church by giving another \$50,000.

We have adopted a girl's school in the pivotally important nation of Pakistan. We have sixteen persons who have signed up to go to Malawi this summer, and thirteen more who want to make a mission trip to Cuba in October. And this is not to mention what is most important – the hundreds of ways you reveal the presence and love of Jesus in your homes, offices, prayers, and service to this community and beyond.

We do have two major challenges before us. The first is Session's desire to find a full-time Director of Family, Youth and Children's Education. This Director will provide direct leadership to our Senior Highs, and an overarching vision for our ministries to families, children and youth. Several of those whom we have interviewed are very excited about the opportunity to contribute to families, children and youth, rather than to be restricted to simply one area. But we seek your prayers and patience as we continue the search for this vitally important position.

Our mid-week program is not nearly as strong as it was, for a variety of reasons. Many of our core families now live in Mahomet, Savoy or St. Joseph and do not want to bring in their youth for a mid-week program. Many of our families have now committed to small groups, and they feel more equipped to communicate the faith to their children at home. This is a good thing. The home should be the locus for Christian Education. And the options for our children and youth in the community proliferate. But with the help of our new Director of Family, Youth and Children's Education, we are determined to forge a new vision to serve a vitally important ministry area – our families, youth and children.

The second major challenge has been the church's relationship with Mother's Morning Out. For several years, due in part to the fact that it's never easy to share space, there

has been friction between our two ministries. Some of MMO's desires for expansion would be difficult in our facility; some of our possibilities for mission can not happen if we are operating a child care program. For example, we were informally approached to see if we could assist with feeding the homeless when the Catholic Worker House stopped their lunch program. That kind of ministry is incompatible with the presence of small children.

We began 2009 wanting to forge a deeper relationship with MMO, but that has not happened. Over the years, fewer and fewer of our church families are involved with MMO. So in essence MMO has become a tenant here at First Church. Session is committed to assisting the birth of MMO as an independent 501©3 organization, and as MMO relocates our prayer is that they will continue to serve the community with innovation and success.

A new challenge and opportunity, then, is to use the available space in the Education Building to serve the community. And as we began to think about possibilities, we learned that the Boys and Girls Club urgently need space to house the 110 children and youth on their waiting list. They urgently need mentors, librarians to help organize their library, math and science specialists to expand the horizons of those children. So is God providing us with other children who need ministry? Is God calling us to be of special service to a constituency of children who are at risk? Could God use this particular ministry as a way of bridging the racial divide that worries our Champaign-Urbana community?

At this point, this is all just an idea. Or perhaps this is a mustard seed that God is planting, and the provision of a means for us to continue to strengthen our historic commitment to children and youth. Three things have always been at the core of our church – worship and music, mission and our commitment to children and youth. I find it exciting that we are building a school for the children of Lisanjala, Malawi, that we have adopted a girl's school in Pakistan, and that 15 of you have already signed up to help with the fledgling ministry with the Boys and Girl's Club. Where will this lead? God only knows, but God does know! And isn't that the promise of the parable of the mustard seed!

I do wish that seeds grew more quickly. But we keep sowing. We sow the seed of hope so a young widow does not give into despair; we sow the seed of courage so an executive has the will to do what is right; we sow the seed of fidelity so our marriage has a firm foundation of trust; we sow the seed of faith, a deep trust that "if God is for us, who can be against us." No, it isn't always easy. When we plant seeds, we need to till and break the soil, to keep the soil free of weeds, to be patient when we see only tiny specks of green. But we keep at it.

In the movie, *O God, God*, played by George Burns appears to a grocery clerk named Jerry, played by John Denver. As Jerry tries to follow God's guidance, he gets into more and more trouble – he gets taken to court; he loses his job; he incurs the ridicule of his neighbors, and he almost loses his wife and family. At the end of the movie, Jerry has it out with God, "This was all a wasted effort. Nobody listened; nobody changed; nobody believed." To which God (George Burns) replies, "Jerry, we planted some seeds. Let's see

what happens. Have faith. They were good seeds.” So let’s keep planting seed! Amen.