

Small, Secret and Surprising: The Kingdom of God

David, the youngest son, the one everyone forgot. A seed so small you can barely hold it. Little things, small beginnings. Of such is the Kingdom of God. It's easy for such small things to be overlooked, forgotten, ignored, or pushed aside as unimportant. In the world of macho politics and powerplays, who would ever look at things like that? How could they make a difference? Yet that's how God chooses to work – quietly, almost stealthily, not by the established paths of power, but through the small, the vulnerable, those who seem to be weak.

In David's case, there was already a king in place. Most people had no idea that God had given up on King Saul. That's why the prophet Samuel had to go to Bethlehem in secret. He didn't want the word of a possible successor to get out. The paths of power were clear. Samuel's subversive act of anointing David was a rebellion against the powers that be, saying that among the small and comparatively powerless, God was creating another way.

That innocuous little mustard seed? It was a weed, not the king of trees like a cedar. A bushy shrub, not tall and magnificent and majestic. No one in their right mind – except possibly Jesus – would choose this plant as an image for the kingdom of God.

Debie Thomas asks, "What is Jesus saying when he describes the sacred and the holy as a tiny, insignificant mustard seed? What does it mean to take an invasive, spindly weed — a plant we'd sooner discard than sow — and make it the very heart, the very structural center, of God's kingdom? Who and what counts in God's economy? What is beautiful? Who matters? Where do we see the sacred?"

When we are confronted by such unlikely candidates for "God's Chosen", it tells us some things. First, it tells us that God values the small, the weak and the insignificant. They have an important place in God's kingdom and God's plan. That means that we should also value the small, the weak and the insignificant. That is an important word to hear on a week when the Attorney General used scripture to justify taking immigrant children away from their parents. God is always on the side of those who can't speak for themselves. It is God's law that tells us to welcome the stranger and care for the widows and orphans. It is Jesus who told the disciples to "let the children come to me."

As people of faith, we have an obligation to speak for and lift up those who are most vulnerable, and especially for those immigrant children.

For us here at Tree of Life Church, there is an additional layer to that. We have been called into ministry with people with physical and intellectual disabilities and their families. It is also our obligation to stand with those folks to get the supports they need to function as full members of our society and if they cannot speak for themselves, speak on their behalf. God works through the weak, the insignificant and those others would overlook. We need to keep our eyes open for where God is doing just that, and support the work of God's kingdom.

The other thing we should think about when we hear that God works through forgotten youngest sons and that God's kingdom is like a small seed that grows into a weed is the nature of God's call in our own lives. In 1 Corinthians 1:26ff Paul encourages us to ^[9]“²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, ^[10] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one ^[11] might boast in the presence of God.

This week the General Assembly of our denomination meets in St. Louis. One of the first acts of GA is to elect its moderators. One of the candidates for moderator, Chantal Antrip, who is from our synod, said in her nominating speech, “If God can chose me, God can chose anyone.” And that is true of most of the leaders God chose in the Bible. In fact, a few of them actually begged God to choose anyone but them. That's the story of our faith down through the ages. God chooses the unexpected, the ne'er-do-well, those removed from power, those who get pushed to the back row or the back pew and through them God does amazing, surprising things.

That means God could and does work through you. You might not think you're much. You might not think you could say anything that would make a difference. You might not think that you could do anything that would count. But you are precisely the kind of person God has always chosen when God wants to make a change in the world. God is at work in the world through you – through us. It is not we who change

things, but God, working in God's small, subversive ways, who changes the world through us.

Katy Matthews says, "There's so much around us today, as there always has been, that may press us down in spirit. We see war and hatred, prejudice and injustice, hunger and violence, the everyday grind of so many lives, the apparent hopelessness and intractability of some problems and conditions. It's difficult indeed to know the ways of God, so often hidden from view or not detected (or noticed) by us.... We live not so much in optimism that thinks we can fix everything but out of the hope born of confidence that God is in charge of everything, and we are simply called to participate in what God is doing in the world. That is why we find flashes of brilliant hope and the promise of a greater day to come. They may only be flashes, but they are powerful epiphanies nevertheless.

We lean on those flashes of hope because it's so hard to believe that the full fruit of God's kingdom will ever come. It's hard not to relapse back into anxiety and fear, to a place of defensiveness from which we shut out and lash out at others. It's hard to wait while those little things grow into more visible evidence of the Kingdom of God.

In April, our granddaughter Amelia and I planted the first seeds in our vegetable garden. The next day I went out to check and see if the seeds had sprouted yet. They hadn't. I did the same thing the next day and the next. Now, I plant seeds every year. I know it takes a week for even the radishes to sprout. But still I checked and doubted. It was cool and rainy. I began to wonder if those seeds were ever going to sprout this year. Maybe this would be the time to just turn the whole garden over and head to the garden store for plants. I didn't turn them over, but I did go to the garden store. They didn't have their vegetable plants out for sale yet. It had been cold and rainy for them too. So I went back and anxiously checked the garden again.

Within a couple of more days, the radishes did sprout, and so did the lettuce. A few more days and there were signs of zinnias and swiss chard. Another week and the peas and beans and nasturtiums pushed their robust heads above the earth. The annual miracle had happened. In spite of all my anxiety, The seeds had sprouted and begun to grow.

That's something to remember when we are about to give up hope in and for the small, insignificant things in the Kingdom of God. God is at work at God's own speed, even when we can't see it.

Yesterday, we had a session retreat, the first we've had since the powerful leadership retreat we had in August of 2016 when the church leaders present felt the Holy Spirit move as we were called to a new mission together. Yesterday's retreat was an opportunity to look back and tell stories as we tried to understand where God has been at work with us as well as a chance to look ahead and decide what our next chapter will look like. Two of the things from yesterday that stick with me are the realization that God had planted seeds that would grow into Tree of Life Church with our current mission and relationships long before we even realized it, seeds that are just now sprouting and beginning to grow. And the realization that unless it's cataclysmic, like an earthquake, change always takes twice as long as you thought it possibly could take. But that doesn't mean God isn't at work.

Those are thoughts I'd hold up now, not just for life here at Tree of Life, but for life in the larger world as well. Even though it may be hard to see, God is already at work through small things, through people whose names we may not know, in hidden ways to bring God's kingdom into being. That work has been underway for a long time now, initiated by the death and resurrection of Jesus. It isn't finished yet. Each of us, no matter how small, has a part to play. And the day will come when the Kingdom of God, sprouts and grow into that giant bush, with room and food for every kind of bird in its branches. Lord, let your Kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.