

LENT 3 2010: FAITH IN ACTION SERIES #3
Luke 13:18-21

THE POWER OF A SINGLE DROP

INTRO: Let me start by giving you a 2-part quiz:

Part 1>

1. Which country has the largest population? (*China, 1.3 billion*)
2. What is the world's tallest mountain? (*Mt. Everest*)
3. What type of tree is the tallest? (*Redwood*)
4. Who is the world's richest man? (*Bill Gates, \$63 billion*)

Part 2 >

1. Which country has the smallest population? (*Vatican City, 920*)
2. What is the world's smallest mountain? (*Mt. Greylock, MA, 3,491 ft*)
3. What type of tree is the shortest? (*dwarf willow, 5 cm, full grown*)
4. Who is the world's poorest man? (*Jed Matthews, owes \$22.4 million and has no assets due to bad investments in an internet company*)

How did you do? If you are like most people, you did better on the first half of the quiz. The point of the quiz is that we tend to recognize, respect and remember those things in life that are big -- while we tend to give little thought to the small things.

Especially, as Americans -- in every aspect of our lives we seem to believe "bigger is better."

- bigger cars
- bigger houses
- bigger TV's

--- Perhaps, where we don't necessarily believe bigger is better is with our electronics -- smaller and smaller tends to be the trend.

But overall -- we like bigger things -- which also translates into MORE things.

We even believe it in spiritual matters -- and church life:

We think that more people, more money, bigger ministries and buildings, more programs, and greater talent will result in greater effectiveness at doing the work of God. And that perspective comes from our belief that God is doing more, and can do more where there is something going on that looks grand and marvelous.

We tend to think the opposite about smaller things:

Again...we act as though God is not working or could not work through smaller churches and ministries, lesser talent, and fewer programs.

We think if it isn't big, God must not be in it.

Not only do we think "*bigger is better*" about our possessions, and churches and ministries -- we also tend to think it about *ourselves*.

We may feel like we aren't big enough, rich enough, talented enough, or important enough for God to use us in any meaningful way.

Today -- I invite you to walk with me through some observations and thoughts about what role "size" plays in God's economy of grace.

First, let's turn to the Bible lesson for today:

READ - Luke 13:18-21

Jesus asks a question- "*What is the Kingdom of God like?*"

No one had ever really conceived "the Kingdom of God" as Jesus described it. In fact, Jesus never really did define it. He just told stories, and gave comparisons to help people understand and visualize what it was like.

The Mustard Seed:

In his first example, Jesus says that God's work in our lives and in our world is like a mustard seed -- which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.

Of course....the mustard seed is very, very small. Specifically, the black mustard seed was the smallest that would ever be sown by a first-century farmer in that part of the world. And quite frankly, the last.

For while the mustard plant had its uses -- it was considered more of a weed. And the "tree" it grew up to be was more like a wild and wrangling bush -- that would easily encroach other plants and crops. The mustard plant typically grew to be 12 feet tall -- and yes, because of the mesh of branches was used by birds in which to make their nests.

The Yeast:

As a boy, Jesus undoubtedly had watched his mother make the daily bread. She would have used yeast to make it rise. We've recalled before how this would not have been the dried yeast of today -- but rather a very small lump of dough saved back from the previous day's baking. The small lump kneaded into the new mixture would cause the yeast to eventually permeate the entire batch.

But the point of the illustration is the amount of flour into which the small amount of yeast was mixed = about 50 pounds of flour = feeding 100 people.

What is the Kingdom of God like?

So, what was Jesus trying to say about the Kingdom of God with these illustrations? Obviously, he wasn't teaching a course on horticulture or home-economics. He was revealing a truth about the nature of God's work in our lives and in our world.

When it comes to how God works -

- God uses small things to do BIG stuff!

- When God desired to create a nation to call his own, he didn't start with a large, established family. Instead, he used a nomadic man and woman too old to conceive children.
- When God wanted to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, he used a man rejected by his own people, a fugitive, who stammered.

- When Jesus called on his disciples to feed over 5,000 people, he used a small boy's sack lunch to do it.
- When Jesus watched people give, he wasn't impressed by the amount of the big donors, but the entire amount offered by the widow's penny.
- And when God came to earth as a human-being, he didn't choose a powerful, famous family to become incarnate through. He came as a baby born in a barn to a poor and seemingly unimportant family.

God uses small things to do BIG stuff!

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

What we might see as too small and insignificant to matter...

- God sees as something he wants to use to accomplish his purpose (and reveal his Kingdom).

Maybe you feel too small and insignificant to make a difference. That is perfect! You know why? Because God reveals through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:27-29): *God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*

God uses small things to do BIG stuff!

We need to remember what "ministry" means:

The Greek word for ministry is "*diakonia*". The root word is "*konis*" which means "dust" or "grit." In other words, **ministry is dirty work.**

Ministry rolls up its sleeves and does things that look unimportant to the world.

Now...the English word "*ministry*" that is used to translate the Greek "*diakonis*" comes from the Latin root word for "small things" -- as in the word "miniscule."

Ministry then is the "*get er done*" work that's most often accomplished through small things.

Living within the Kingdom of God in and through our lives means we are called to do little acts, small gestures, and everyday service.

Very few of us have "big lives" or careers that make a big splash in the public sphere of life. Our lives -- and our ministry seem to deal with such ordinary things that it is often difficult to grasp their lasting impact -- and therefore, worth.

Those who ask such questions have discovered that church members often either abandon or give less than 100% to a ministry because they don't see it as successful, or believe that God could work mightily through something that appears to be unnecessary, or too small to make a big impact in their lives or the lives of others.

Size -- or apparent lack of size -- becomes a discouragement.

And yet, just like God can bring forth a bush of significant size out of an insignificant seed -- God can do the same with you and me.

The Lesson Here:

Think of the people who have made the most significant impact and difference in your life. I'll bet you that for just about everyone here -- they were not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards.

They were the ones who did the little things with a big heart.

Mother Teresa once said:

"We can do no great things; only small things with great love."

Personal Example:

As I prepared to go off to college -- it was at a time in my family life when my father's alcoholism (although he was now sober and working) had caused a very significant loss in the household income. My mother and step-father were struggling financially -- and my grandparents were beginning to feel the pinch on living on a fixed income.

But I had been accepted to Florida Southern College, a 4-year liberal arts, private United Methodist school. I had received the needed financial aid. And I had the basics of what I needed.

I was visiting with one of my high school teachers just before leaving for college. Mrs. O'Shaunessy had been one of the faculty advisors for the "Youth For Christ" club. I, also, knew Mr. & Mrs. O'Shaunessy from the yacht club where I had worked as a bus boy, and from just living in the same beach community.

It was 1981 -- and you'll remember the "preppy look" was just coming back in style. I shared with Mrs. O'Shaunessy the various orientation events I'd be attending. And how I had saved up and bought myself a pair of gray slacks and a navy blazer.

She got up and left the room for a few moments. When she returned she had a man's tie in her hand. "You need a good tie for when you attend the President's reception," she said.

She looked toward her husband as she held up the very smart looking ribbed tie, and explained, "And I believe a Countess Mara will be just the thing."

Mr. O'Shaunessy nodded in agreement.

I'd never heard of a Countess Mara tie. But, Mrs. O'Shaunessy assured me that others would recognize the small crest embroidered on the tip.

And she was correct. Several students made acknowledging comments on my tie -- including the wife of the college president.

Now -- did that tie totally turn my life around? No.

But that small gesture did give a young man just a little bit more self-confidence to move forward into an experience that would, indeed, impact and influence his life in an even greater way.

I'd like to say I still have that Countess Mara tie -- I know I haven't bought another one. But, I gave it away -- to a young man in one of my youth groups who was going for his college interview -- wearing a pair of gray slacks and a navy blazer that his single mother had saved up for.

CHRISTIAN LIFE --- CHURCH LIFE:

Dal Snipes, Jason Carter and I attended a seminar sponsored by the Leadership Academy of the NC Annual Conference. The main speaker was the pastor of Grace UMC in Cape Coral, Florida. He was invited because while serving as the pastor -- the church had made a turn-around from 400 people attending Sunday services, and having \$29.60 in the checking account to over 2000 for weekend services, including 4 satellite campuses, a ministry center and a sustained budget of over \$2 million.

He had served the church for 14 years. And he shared that during the first 7-8 it was rough going. Some people --even charter members -- left. But so many others had come.

He brought along two members of his church. One who had been going to the church since she was a youth -- and had even worked on the staff of the church. The other was a man who in recent years became a member through the Celebrate Recovery ministry which reaches out to people struggling with addictions.

Dal, Jason and I heard about how the church re-structured its leadership. We learned about how they re-visioned their mission statement. We learned about some of the nuts and bolts of transformational leadership.

But what this lead pastor and these church members revealed to us was that it all came down to individual lives being touched and changed by the grace of God -- which came through the everyday relationships and gestures of the people in the pews.

It began with a few folks taking to heart the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the call to "Go, make disciples" through their everyday involvements. The ministries that have sprung up, and those that have grown came --not from the pastor's initiation -- but from individuals who responded to God's touch and call in their lives.

GO SMALL TO GROW BIG > A MODEL FOR CHURCH???

I am going to share with you something that's been on my heart and mind -- really, for a number of years. We might call it a vision of church life -- I'm not sure. But, I know that at it's

very base is this idea that real transformation -- in lives and in our world begins with life-on-life, shared experiences.

Hopefully, from the front page of this month's newsletter, you understand that I not only appreciate, but encourage church members serving in the community and world beyond any church programs.

I believe what Jesus was revealing about the Kingdom of God through the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast is that the Church is to be at work *in* the world.

I don't believe God has brought his Church into being to be put aside, or even to be some sort of "Christian alternative community" within the larger community.

The farmer went out and sowed the seed. The seed had to be planted in the dirt. It went through the same germination process as any other seed.

The small lump of dough with the yeast in it wasn't kept off to the side -- it was placed within the whole mixture.

The mustard seed and yeast produced a big amount because they lived and worked among those things in their environment.

My vision of a church is where every follower of Jesus Christ is out and about making a difference in the world in and through their involvement with their everyday world.

Can you imagine with me a community where our business owners and leaders apply their faith and teachings of Jesus to their practices?

Can you imagine with me a community where those involved in politics bring with them their relationship and teachings of Jesus to influence party agendas and legislative processes?

Can you imagine with me community sports leagues, and arts councils, and garden clubs, and book clubs are populated with individuals who take their relationship with Christ seriously when deciding upon times for practice and games, meetings, and projects?

I hope you get what I am trying to picture for you....

So What About the "Church"?

We say, and we sing, "We are the church..." So, we know the Church is more than bricks and mortar -- and organized programs and ministries.

And at the same time -- the Church is all those things, as well.

We are told in the Letter to the Hebrews not to stop meeting together. But hear what is being said: **Hebrews 10:24-25**

"...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

It appears that one of the purposes for gathering together -- to be organized as a congregation - - is to encourage one another toward living in God's love, and expressing God's love through service.

Worship> brings us together into God's presence to hear the Good News proclaimed through scripture, and song, and witness. It is a special, and mysterious, experience of the presence of Christ in our midst that cannot be experienced on an individual basis.

Sunday School, Small Groups, Ministry Groups > these all offer us opportunities to grow in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. And yes, they offer opportunities to serve and minister in ways beyond what can be achieved outside our church identity.

- Prison Ministry would be more difficult without a "church affiliation"
- Teaching the Scriptures and proclaiming Jesus as Lord is often difficult, if not prohibited, in many settings beyond a "church" gathering or event.

A Larger Witness> Organized, or "church-sponsored" programs and ministries do give a larger witness in the community about what life with Jesus Christ is all about.

- a quality educational experience through a church-sponsored pre-school that not only teaches learning skills, but Bible-based principles is a direct witness.

- church-run food pantries, clothing closets and shelters communicate the God-given reality that we are to care for one other, and offer a hand-up to each other in life.

So how do I envision "the church"?

When I am up here preaching about reaching out to others....And go out to make disciples....And being outward-focused....And imploring you to get more involved....

.....I am not envisioning "church" as the "mega-church" model.

I'm not interested in us opening a church coffee house, or book store, or even our own church tire garage.

Instead....I envision a congregation of followers of Christ responding to his touch of grace and call in their lives with creativity and intentionality in and through their everyday lives -- their businesses -- their civic involvements -- their arts and leisure time.

I envision a congregation that might, indeed, have several worship services during a weekend.

A congregation with folks who meet regularly in classes or small groups for fellowship, bible study, and ministry service.

A congregation with as many folks involved in ministry as there are listed on the rolls.

But, more than that -- **I envision a congregation that is making a difference in the lives of individuals -- one-by-one, as they share their lives of faith one-to-one.**

If that's what we can do -- then God will provide both the creativity and the means to add on new facilities, or expand ministries so that we may continue to work with God in expanding his Kingdom.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

"Faith In Action Sunday" is just two weeks away.

And it may seem counter to what I've just been saying about how ministry is more than church programs.

However, doing things together is important, as it is Biblical.

Yes -- we want to make a visible impact in our community as a congregation by going out at what would normally be our regular time of Sunday worship to do service projects.

Yes -- there will be a bit of self-promotion involved, but its aim is to give witness to our presence in the community, and our dedication to serve our community in the name of Jesus Christ.

But truly at the heart of this whole endeavor is to touch lives with the grace of God.

Through mustard-seed acts of service, our prayer is that God's Kingdom will take root in the lives of others.

And as I shared last Sunday -- **my prayer** is that some of you may experience God's presence and grace in your lives in ways that either you haven't before, and in the way you once did.

Here's my confession of doubt:

I suspect that some of you will not participate in "Faith Action Sunday."

It will mess up your Sunday schedule.

It's not what you're "into".

Church is about coming on Sunday mornings, sitting in a pew,
and then going out to lunch and returning home.

To you, I say, "I understand." I'm saddened -- not because it won't be a bigger event because of your non-involvement, but because I know of the opportunity you are passing up to have an experience of God's grace working **through you** as you serve alongside others.

I also know that some will not choose to participate because you feel like you can't. Physically, you just cannot get out to Tyler Park and dig and clean up. You can't get out and go to the Nursing Home.

- But you can, stay here and help out with the Health Kits.
- You can bring with you over these next two weeks items to go into the health kits.
- And you can pray. I mean truly pray for those who will be working at the park, visiting others, and assembling kits.

The Evening Celebration:

Finally, at the end of the day is when we will truly have an experience as we celebrate how God's Kingdom was revealed through our work together.

The early Christians would gather for a community meal, as we will at 5:00 on March 21. It was a time for fellowship, and sharing life stories.

And then, they would join in an act of worship -- again, as we will at 6:30. We will worship God through songs, and hearing from each other of how we experienced the touches of God's presence and grace as we share.

And whether or not you choose either not to join in the service projects, or you were unable -- we want you -- **I want you** -- to join us for the meal and evening worship.

Because in my vision of a congregation is the reality where all are welcome -- and all share in the joys and accomplishments of the community of faith.

You may not have participated directly in the service projects that day -- but as you join in the fellowship and hear in worship of God's grace at work -- your own life may well be touched, and your heart strangely warmed.

There is incredible life-changing power when one person grabs hold of the fact that through Jesus Christ one life can make a difference. One life touches a life, touches a life, touches another life.

One church can truly make a difference. One church touching its community, joining with other congregations in a powerful movement of Christians putting their faith in action....

It is truly amazing.

Don't miss that.

Don't let that pass you by.

A Single Drop Can Make a Big Splash.