

The Difference of Little Things

Matthew 13:31-33

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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I

The problems we face today are large and many.

- Item #1: In healthcare, the number of Covid cases has been surging in many places across the globe, including the United States. The surge of cases is so strong that some people are no longer talking about a first wave and a second wave, but are instead talking about a firestorm of Covid cases.
- Item #2: In social relationships, the pervasive lack of intercultural competence and understanding is finding new expression in calls for reform, so that all persons are treated honorably.
- Item #3: In economics, oodles of people who lost their jobs earlier this year cannot now find another one. Meanwhile, the economy struggles and businesses are trying to find ways to survive in a new economic environment.
- Item #4: In religion, the number of adults who describe themselves as Christian has declined 12 percentage points in the last decade. Meanwhile, 26% of Americans now describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or nothing in particular, up from 17% a decade ago. ¹

None of this considers additional problems such as climate change and its consequences or continuing wars. In such a context, we can easily feel doomed, as if these problems are too big and complex for us to solve.

II

This is not new. During and immediately after the lifetime of Jesus, the problems people faced in the Roman world were also large and many.

¹ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>, accessed June 24, 2020.

- Item: In healthcare, epidemics of various kinds swept through the empire several times. In the second century, a plague lasting 10 years, probably smallpox, wiped out about 15% of the population, including Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Another plague swept across the empire in the third century, killing many people as well.
- Item: In social relationships, slavery was a persistent scourge. During the first century, about 1 in 5 people who lived in the Roman Empire were slaves, and in the city of Rome, about 1 in 3 people were slaves.
- Item: In economics, taxes were astronomic. Taxes varied depending on the area, but in Palestine, taxes were particularly bad. The tax system was set up so that when people could not pay, they were booted off their land, which lenders then took as compensation for the unpaid tax. Dispossessed of their land, many people became bandits and robbers in an effort to get food, which in turn made travel on some roads unsafe. Do you remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? He began the story by saying, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. . . ." Well, that particular road was notorious in the first century for being unsafe because of all the bandits.²
- Item: In religion, only a tiny minority of people in the empire was Jewish, and later, only a tiny minority was Christian. Compared to the huge numbers of people who worshiped popular gods like Isis, Mithras, Dionysius, or Artemis, both Jews and Christians were regarded as fools who worshiped a weak, irrelevant God.

It's easy to imagine that the followers of Jesus felt doomed, as if these problems were too big and complex for them to solve.

² K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structure and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 87-90.

III

In the face of these problems, Jesus says little things make a difference. In Matthew 13:31-33, he tells two closely related parables. Let me read them for you, slightly adapted from the NRSV.

³¹ *Jesus put before them a parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

³³ *Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”*

Let’s look at a mustard seed. I have a glass bowl here in front of me with a few mustard seeds. I’m going to pick one up with a tweezers and show it to you. *[Pick one up.]* Can you see it? Round and yellow. Mustard seeds, at least those sold in local grocery stores, are only about 2 millimeters wide. They’re tiny things.

I have another bowl with grains of yeast. If you bake bread or rolls, you know how tiny yeast is. I’ll try to pick one up with my tweezers, but I may not be able to. *[Try to pick one up.]* Here’s what I have. Can you see it on your screen? Probably not. It looks like a tiny beige rod. It’s only about half a millimeter wide and about 1 millimeter long, even tinier than a mustard seed.

That, says Jesus, is how the kingdom of God begins. God’s work in the world starts with something so tiny that you *might* be able to see it—or you might *not* be able to see it. However, under the right conditions these tiny things grow into something kind of marvelous. A teeny mustard seed can grow into a plant large enough to shelter birds. Teensy yeast grains can become tasty fresh bread.

Here’s the thing to keep in mind. By themselves, a single mustard seed or a few grains of yeast don’t amount to much. In fact, by themselves, they can’t really do anything at all. But when you add them to other things, they have a significant effect. Add a mustard seed to soil, water, and sun, and you’ll get a glorious plant. Add a bit of yeast to flour, water, and sugar, and you get the magic of bread. Essentially, that’s how the

kingdom of God also operates. God might start with something small, then we come along and add our own contributions to it. In turn, God adds a little more, and once again, maybe we too add a little more—and as if by magic, the kingdom of God happens.

IV

Let's consider some examples of how little things make a difference.

- One example that quickly springs to mind is dealing with Covid-19. By now it's clear that doing little things makes a huge difference in cutting down on the spread of the disease. A big one is wearing a mask when we're out and about. *[Put mine on.]* Wearing a mask is one of the most compassionate, most loving, most Christian things we can do. *[Remove.]* Other little things also make a difference, like staying at least 6 feet away from others and not singing with other people around.
- Another example is dealing with climate change. You may suppose that installing solar panels on our church roof was a small thing, and so it was. Yet crafting a bunch of small changes is exactly the right approach. Climate change is happening largely because we're burning too many fossil fuels. So we have to start using other sources for our energy—things like solar panels, wind and water generators, and the like.
- A personal example from family life. While I was growing up, my father was always the first person out of bed in the morning, and I was often the second. By the time I got up, he was at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of Wheaties and milk, drinking a cup of black coffee, with an open Bible in front of him, praying with, and meditating on, a single passage of scripture. He never told me I should do this, or even talked about why he did it. He just did it, morning after morning, seven days a week, for decades on end. It was a small, quiet thing. But guess what? Now I'm doing basically the same thing. No one told me I should do it, but I think I'm doing it because I saw

my father doing it most of his adult life. The small things parents do make a big difference to their children.

- My last example is the Camaldolese Benedictines. I'm guessing most of you have never heard of them, which is exactly why I'm using them as an example of little things that matter. The Camaldolese Benedictines are a very old order in the Catholic Church which started around 1012, making them about one thousand and eight years old. They've never been very large. Right now in the United States, they number about 30 members scattered across 4 monasteries. They're about as tiny as you can get. Yet at the same time, about 1,000 people, called oblates, have chosen to formally identify with those 30 Camaldolese and to live in the world according to Camaldolese values. These values include a dedication to praying every day with scripture, being in community with others, living in solitude with God, and doing some kind of work in the world that benefits other people.

V

The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is crafted from little things that will have a greater effect down the road, sometime in the future. What little things are you doing that will make a difference? *[Pick up a mustard seed again.]* What's your mustard seed?