

Sunday July 30th, 2017
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PRAYER: As you came seeking Moses, O God, you come seeking us. And you say to us, as to him, “I will stretch out my hand and let you go.” But we do not merely echo the request of Moses for deliverance from bondage. Assured that freedom and all these other things shall be added unto us, we pray only for the gift of your presence. Amen.

CALL TO CONFESSION: King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 28:13 this timely advice, “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” Let us therefore pray together...

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: Father in Heaven, you are our God. It is you who has made us; we are your people and the sheep of your pasture. We confess that we have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way. We have been quick to follow the promptings and temptations of our own hearts. We have been negligent in following the teachings of your Word and the promptings of your spirit. As a consequence, we have not done those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. Most assuredly we have demonstrated the waywardness of our hearts. God Shepherd of the sheep, you who gave your life that we might be brought back into the fold, have mercy upon us, forgive us our sin, and restore unto us the joy of our salvation. According to the promises of your words grant unto us fullness of life in the present and the joyful hope of eternity with you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Having confessed your sin, and having sought the Lord, may you experience His mercy and be assured of his pardon. (Adapted from Isa. 55:6-7)

STEWARDSHIP: From Deuteronomy 16:16-17 we read, “No one shall come into the presence of the Lord empty-handed. Each of you shall bring such a gift as he can in proportion to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you.” Let us now offer unto God our tithes and offerings.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, lover of all people, we find ourselves troubled today. Troubled by the inadequacy of our words to pray, and to praise your name. We want so badly to honour you in our prayers, but we are left only with metaphors, and poetic verses to direct our heartfelt thoughts. But even these words seem inadequate. It troubles us even more O God, that some in our human family see the ancient metaphors in your ancient scriptures, as somehow literal pictures of you. They use these ancient descriptions of you, from another time and culture to justify hatred, prejudice, and all manner of evil. We know, even in our limited thoughts and words, that you are not vengeful or an angry tyrant. Nor do you delight in our using rhetoric, even based on selected bible verses, to condemn and exclude people from your Kingdom.

Thank you for Jesus, who demonstrated and taught over and over again, that the best way we can ever hope to understand you, is by loving you, and by loving others. How we marvel at Jesus, who warmly welcomed, and dined with those who made the establishment, even the religious establishment, cringe and avoid. Thank you for Jesus who taught us about the incredible power of even the smallest portion of your presence to change lives and bring hope. Help us O God to be more like Jesus.

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To stand boldly, and to welcome fully, those that even religious folks deem unworthy. Help us to look for the Kingdom of God at work in our community of Simcoe. Help us to nurture the smallest little seeds of hope, so that entire families and neighbourhoods can be radically renewed.

We also thank you for your Holy Spirit, who is always present in us, and around us. Who moves as unpredictably as the wind. We know the Spirit is like the wind in our sails. Without the Spirit at work in us, and through us, we flounder. Without the Spirit, we are without hope in the face of life's great challenges. Where is the hope in the doctor's office, the cancer ward, the nursing home, the family in distress, unless the Spirit is there?

More than anything, O God, we long to be more confident in our faith. We long to face even the fiercest storm, with a foundation built on the rock of Christ Jesus. O God, give us such confidence, and if we should falter, bring another brother or sister along side us to ride out our storm with us. Thank you, O God, for those kind, loving souls who have been our refuge in the past, and thank you for the privilege of being that refuge for someone else.

BENEDICTION: Our eyes have beheld you glory, O Christ. Although you walked among us as one of us, you did not live among us as one of us. You lived and loved, not as we live and love, but as God lives and loves. You gave up your claim to earth's rewards for heavenly treasure. Grant us the grace to go and do likewise. Amen.

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
“Kingdom Treasure”

I was wondering how many of you have heard of a man named Kyle MacDonald. Kyle MacDonald is a man who had a problem. You see, he was stuck in a dead-end job and was seriously strapped for cash. One day he came up with what seems like the most improbable idea: starting with just one red paperclip, he would trade on the internet until he exchanged it for a house.

First, Kyle traded the paper clip for a fish-shaped pen. Next, he traded the pen for a doorknob. He traded the doorknob for a Coleman stove. He traded the Coleman stove for an electric generator. He traded the electric generator for a Budweiser sign and a keg of beer, which he traded for a snowmobile. Exactly one year and 14 trades later, MacDonald finally reached his goal: he exchanged a part in a Hollywood movie for a home in Saskatchewan.

The true story of Kyle MacDonald is told in his book *One Red Paperclip*. Now the book is being made into a movie. Fame, fortune, a book, a movie deal, and a home-it all began with one red paperclip. Sounds incredible, right? Perhaps MacDonald was just lucky, because he was the first to try this experiment, and people wanted to see him succeed. In our skeptical minds, we doubt such a similar outcome if we started with a paperclip.

As a people, we haven't much faith in small things. We believe that if something is good, then the more of it we can attain, the better off we will be. Food service providers realize this when they super-size their portions if you only pay a small amount like say \$.90. We feel cheated when someone else gets a bigger portion of our favourite dessert. In my family growing up the rule was, that whoever cut the pie chose their piece last, thereby insuring a fairer distribution.

So, is bigger always better, or maybe we can better express it; is there any kind of potential in things being small?

Now into this obsession over bigger is better, Jesus presents a series of little parables that describe the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. He begins with what seems most improbable; the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. In the Middle East, there are several species of plants in the mustard family. Scholars like to spend endless hours debating which particular species Jesus was referring to, but it really doesn't matter I think. The point is, it was a mustard seed.

Mustard was a valued plant in Jesus' day; valued for its seeds which were ground up to produce spice, and also for oil. Although the seeds are not the smallest seeds in the world, they were the smallest seeds that the majority of Jesus' audience would be familiar with. Left to fully mature, some species can grow quite large, almost to the size of a small tree or bush, and yes some can grow large enough for birds to roost on its branches.

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Then Jesus talks about something even smaller. He says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast used by a woman making bread. The amount of yeast in a loaf of bread is relatively quite small compared to the amount of flour, but its influence is incredible, as it makes the bread rise. Mustard seeds and yeast; what is Jesus trying to say? A clue to understanding Jesus may be found in Matthew 17:20 where the mustard seed makes a return.

In this verse, Jesus says in response to the disciples' inability to cast out a demon from a boy tormented from birth. "You don't have enough faith", Jesus says, "I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible." Taken together with the two previous parables, it seems to me that Jesus is talking about potential.

Jesus is stating that the Kingdom of Heaven has so much potential, that even the tiniest amount can work incredible changes. The late Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, tells the story about an old man who lived high above an Austrian Village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. He had been hired by the village council many years ago to clear away debris from the pools of water up in the mountain crevices that fed the lovely stream flowing through their village.

With faithful, silent regularity, he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt that would otherwise choke and contaminate the fresh flow of water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for visitors. Graceful swans floated along the crystal-clear stream; picnickers gathered on its banks; and the view of the water from local shops and cafes were picturesque beyond description.

Many years passed by and one evening the town council met for its semi-annual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, they noticed a small amount that was being paid to the "keeper of the spring".

The villager treasurer asked an obvious question, "Who is this 'keeper of the spring'? Why do we keep him on the payroll year after year? No one ever sees him. Have any of you ever met this man? For all we know, he is simply taking our money and doing us no good whatsoever. In my opinion, this person is no longer necessary." Everyone agreed with the treasurer, and the council voted unanimously to dismiss the old man.

For several weeks, nothing much changed. The village went about its business as usual. By autumn, the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools that fed the stream, hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon, someone noticed a yellowish-brown tint in the water. A couple of days later the water was much darker.

Within another week or two, a slimy film covered sections of water along the banks and a foul odour was soon detected. The swans left the village, as did the tourists. The economy of the village was in serious peril. Likewise, was the health of the village, as many were getting sick from drinking the water.

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An emergency meeting of the village council was held. After much discussion, they realized their error in judgment, and they hired back the old “keeper of the spring.” And within a few weeks, the beautiful stream came back to life. The swans and visitors gradually returned, as did the vitality and well-being of the little village in the Alps. (*Improving Your Serve*, by Chuck Swindoll)

We can never underestimate the potential for good that even the smallest portion of God’s presence can have in this world. One can shudder at the concept of what this world would look like without the seeds and yeast of the Kingdom of Heaven being scattered about. Imagine how many good works and initiatives to improve the lives of others would be lost if not for the faith of people in God.

Remove the mustard seeds of faith, and there is no CBM or the Sharing Way. No World Vision, Salvation Army, Church Out Serving, First Serving, or the Pregnancy Care Center ; none of it would exist without the influence of the Kingdom growing in us and this community. And Jesus’ point is that it takes such a little amount. The great spectacular demonstrations of the Kingdom, while memorable, are not the common way the Kingdom grows.

Sometimes the grandest activities in God’s Kingdom have begun with the smallest idea or act of faith. I present for your consideration, our whole “We Believe in Simcoe Day” initiative. All begun with a simple idea of helping people struggling economically and giving them a special day all to their own and look how the seed grew; touching all aspects of our churches and this community.

The sad part of this fact is that despite evidence of the potential of the Kingdom of Heaven, we do not diligently look for it. In the parables of the pearl merchant, and the land buyer, there is a real sense that these two men were looking for the treasure. In Jesus’ day, burying treasure was common practice to protect valuables from marauding armies and thieves.

Sometimes a person would move on or die, and the treasure would be forgotten. Discovering treasure in a field was a common enough experience in Jesus’ day that people actively looked for it. In a similar way, the pearl merchant knew his pearls, and he was constantly looking for that special one. Jesus is telling us to be always vigilant, looking for the Kingdom at work.

To be always looking for those ministries and missions that have great potential to influence many lives. It may be that right now, the activity is very small, maybe even in many eyes insignificant, but the seed or the yeast is there. The potential is there for greatness. Then having discerned the hand of God at work in this seed of potential, we are called on to invest ourselves fully in seeing the seed, or yeast, reaches its full potential.

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Thus, the treasure hunter having found the treasure, went and sold everything he had to possess the field and the treasure in it. Thus, the pearl merchant finding the rare and valuable pearl of great price, went and sold everything he had to possess it.

Talk about putting all your eggs in one basket. It sounds like a very risky venture, but as we like to say, “Nothing ventured nothing gained”.

And nowhere is this saying truer than when it refers to the Kingdom of God. The two hard questions in this passage as I see it are this: Are we even looking for the treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven and if we are, how committed are we to investing in what we find? How many of us have truly given our all for the Kingdom? How many of us have given 50%, 25%, 10% or maybe even a mustard seed sized amount?

Jesus said, “Where your heart is there your treasure will be.” What we value most in our lives is what we invest our time, talent, and treasure in. Are our hearts in the Kingdom of Heaven? Speaking for myself, I wish I could shout out an affirmative and confident yes. Yet, I know, and the Holy Spirit is constantly making me well aware of how small my faith is, and how divided my heart is, and this division keeps us from greatness for God.

A few years ago, at Princeton Seminary, Toyhitiko Kagawa delivered a sermon. Kagawa was a Japanese Christian who had risked his life time and time again during World War II in order to save American airmen who had been shot down over Japan. He hid them, and did his best to keep them alive by sharing his limited supply of food. It wasn't that he sided with the American cause; it was just that his Christianity compelled him to love even those who were bombing and killing his friends and relatives.

Eventually, Kagawa was caught, tortured and in prison contracted tuberculosis. That day in Princeton as he spoke before the students, his body was frail, and his voice was weak. Sitting in the audience were two young seminary students who were obviously not impressed by Kagawa's testimony. At the end of the message one turned to the other and said, “He really didn't say very much-did he?”

At that point, an elderly woman sitting in front of them turned and said, “Young man! When a man is hanging on a cross, he doesn't have to say anything at all!” And that's the point of these parables. Unless we are willing to pay the price, we cannot be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is worth more than all of us combined and its presence is scattered all through us and around us.

It may be hard for us to see at first, but as we train ourselves to look for it and treasure it, it will blossom and flourish, to such an extent that it will dominate our lives. It will also reveal its incredible beauty and vast potential.

And we will discover that as we place our hearts in pursuit of the Kingdom, we will have no difficulties offering all we have and all we are to possessing it. So, what is heaven like? Well it's like a mustard seed or bread yeast, full of enormous potential to influence everything and everyone around us. So, what is heaven like?

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Well, it is like a pearl or a treasure buried in a field that calls on us to give everything to pursuing and possessing it for ourselves.

God's great net has been cast and we have all been caught in it. And what determines whether we are a valuable catch worthy of keeping, or a bad catch to be thrown away, has everything to do with whether or not we believe the Kingdom of Heaven worthy of our hearts. The choice is entirely up to us.