

“A Parable of Encouragement”
Matthew 13:31-35 and Galatians 6:7-10

In the mail the other day I received an offer to purchase a Bible study outline entitled, “Are You Making an Eternal Difference?” The obvious intent of this study was to assist participants to evaluate from a biblical perspective whether their investments in people’s lives were making an eternal difference.

You know, I’d certainly like to think that my efforts during the 25 years in which I’ve engaged in full-time ministry have made a difference in assisting children, young people and adults to draw closer to Christ. But, it isn’t too difficult for me to remember discouraging times in ministry when I really wondered if what I was doing made much of a difference at all.

Some of you have heard the story of a particularly dark chapter in my years of ministry that involved the antics of two boys in my first church who very nearly, single-handedly drove me out of the ministry. Their names were Derek and Doug, and they were Jr. High boys. They were members of the Tuesday night Jr. High fellowship group that I led at First Presbyterian Church of Salem, Oregon.

Every Tuesday night I was frustrated by their rude and outlandish behavior. They seemed determined to never listen and hopefully disrupt every meeting. Inevitably, every Tuesday evening I would go home exhausted, defeated, and wondering if I was really cut out for full-time ministry.

I tried reasoning with them. I tried threatening them. I’m not proud of the fact that I even tried bribing them. At one point, with the full support of their parents, I even banished them from youth group for a month because their behavior was so out of hand.

Much to my chagrin, after a month, they came back more out of control than ever!

Needless, to say, this was not a glorious chapter in my ministry career.

So, yes, I understand first hand what it feels like to be discouraged and to wonder if your efforts are making any difference whatsoever, let alone an eternal difference. But, I'll bet that I am not alone! I'll bet that all of us have known discouragement as sometimes our best, most faithful efforts offered in Jesus' name have seemed to be wasted efforts.

Our Gospel text for this morning, Matthew 13:31-35, contains welcome words for you and for me. Words of encouragement contained within a parable that Jesus once told, the Parable of the Mustard Seed. A brief, but powerful, parable that encourages us to not give up on planting seeds in faith that will make an eternal difference. Let's listen now to Jesus' words in Matthew 13 which may be found on page 14 in the New Testament section of your red pew Bible.

Recently, as I was reading a chapter of Phillip Yancey's wonderful book, "Reaching for the Invisible God," a helpful window of understanding about discouragement was opened for me. In this chapter he says, "I once watched a series on public television based on interviews with survivors from World War II. The soldiers recalled how they spent a particular day. One sat in a foxhole all day; once or twice, a German tank drove by, and he shot at it. Others played cards and frittered away the time. A few got involved in furious firefights. Mostly, the day passed like any other day for an infantryman on the front. Later, they learned they had just participated in one of the largest, most decisive engagements of the war, the Battle of the Bulge. It did not feel

decisive to any of them at the time, because none had the big picture of what was happening elsewhere.”

In a sense, that’s how it is for us. When we set about faithfully planting seeds and investing in the lives of others in Jesus’ name, we are prone to discouragement. Rarely do we see instant results. Like the soldiers Yancey spoke of, we don’t have the big picture; we don’t see how our actions fit into God’s larger plan of building the Kingdom. Rarely, if ever, are we privy to the rest of the story or the final outcome of God’s activity in the lives of people we seek to serve.

That’s why our parable for this morning is such an important parable of encouragement for you and me. This little parable provides us with the amazing gift of the big picture and the rest of the story.

Like all of Jesus’ parables, this parable arrests our attention and takes us by surprise. A mustard seed, the smallest of seeds used by farmers, so tiny that seeing one would be impossible without my bifocals...would result in a plant 6 feet, and in some extraordinary cases, 9 or 10 feet, in height. Clearly, the point of this parable is that small beginnings yield big results. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God was like that...small beginnings...12 nondescript disciples in Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago...will yield big results...results beyond imagining in the future when the Kingdom is revealed in all its fullness.

That’s the overarching point or message of this important parable. But, I’d like to suggest what I sense this parable specifically says to all of us who seek to faithfully plant seeds and make investments in the lives of others that will make an eternal difference.

The first thing I hear in this parable is that the Kingdom of God grows as you and I work in partnership with God. Mustard seeds and any other seeds will never grow unless they are planted in the ground. God counts on us to plant seeds. God counts on us to get our hands dirty and get involved in the lives of others, planting the seeds of the Kingdom through our words and actions.

But, do notice that I said that the kingdom grows as we work in partnership with God. It's not all up to us. I pray that we'll not be like the man in an old story who bought a house with an overgrown garden. The weeds had long since taken over the garden and it was a mess. But slowly the man began to clear the weeds and till the soil and plant the seeds. Finally, he made it into a beautiful garden that was the envy of the neighborhood. One day the man's minister came for a visit, and when he saw the beautiful flowers and plants, he observed, "Well, friend, you and God have done a marvelous job on this garden." To which the man replied, "You should have seen it when God had it by himself."

As we work in partnership with God, doing our part to plant seeds, we must remember that the growth is not up to us! It is God who causes the growth. But, in this parable we are reminded that no seed we plant in Jesus' name is too small to contribute to the growth of the Kingdom.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus frequently spoke about the importance of small things: the mustard seed, the cup of cold water, the widow's mite, the one talent, acts of compassion done unto one of "the least of these." Seemingly small and insignificant efforts that Jesus says can produce results of infinite worth in the kingdom of God.

It seems to me that the bottom line of this parable is that even the smallest seed planted with faith and hope will produce growth that will be, in the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:20, “beyond anything we can ask or imagine.”

These are welcome words of encouragement, friends. Words that encourage us to keep faithfully planting seeds day by day, entrusting the outcome and the ultimate growth of the Kingdom to God.

As I said earlier, it’s impossible for us to fully understand the big picture into which our actions fit. Rarely, if ever are we privy to the rest of the story or the final outcome of God’s activity in any person’s life or situation. However, even with that said, every once in a while, for reasons only God fully understands, God does give us a glimpse behind the scenes. Every once in a great while, we have one of those experiences that wipes away all the discouragement and reminds us that no effort offered in Jesus’ name is wasted effort.

I had one of those experiences several years ago when I served as a chaplain at Whitworth College. During new student orientation I was manning a booth promoting the programs sponsored by the Chaplains’ Office. A tall, handsome freshman young man approached me and said, “You don’t remember me, do you?” He looked familiar, but I really couldn’t place him. He said, “I’m Derek, and you used to be my youth minister.” I was stunned. He seemed genuinely glad to see me, and asked if we might set an appointment to get together and talk during the coming week. We set the appointment, but as the time for our meeting approached, I found myself wondering if he wanted to come in and finish the job he started years earlier.

Well, nothing could have been further from the truth. No one could have prepared me for what Derek had to say. “You know, I made this appointment so I could come in and thank you for hanging in there with me when I was in Jr. High. I know I wasn’t the easiest kid in the group (understatement of the century!). But, you need to know how much I looked forward to Tuesday nights. Even though I didn’t act like it, I loved the games, the songs, the friends, and the talks about Jesus.”

He went on to tell me that a few years after I last saw him, he gave his life to Christ at a Young Life rally in Salem, Oregon. He concluded by telling me that his relationship with Jesus Christ was the most important relationship in his life. His parting comment was, “I just wanted you to know what an important part you played in helping me come to know Jesus.”

Now, I have to tell you, the year after that conversation, I left the Chaplains’ staff at Whitworth College. I’ve never seen Derek again. I’ve wondered off and on what happened to him. I imagine that as he has moved through life, he has experienced what you and I have experienced: highs and lows, joys and sorrows, unexpected twists and turns.

All I know is that in that one moment in time, our wise and gracious God, for reasons unknown to me, pulled back the eternal curtain just a little bit for me, and I understood with both my head and my heart, that all the efforts, some great, but mostly pretty small, were worth it. None of my seed planting was wasted. I was encouraged deep down in my soul.

And that’s the point of this important parable this morning. Friends, be encouraged. In the words of our first Scripture reading for this morning, “...let us not

grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up”
(Galatians 6:9).

Keep faithfully and hopefully planting seeds, knowing that, what God starts, God finishes...with you and with his Kingdom. May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.