

## ***Small Things Make a Big Difference***

Based on Matthew 13:31-50

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

July 30, 2023

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Think about surprising things in life that have changed your perspective, challenged what you considered logical or rational. God's Kingdom vision – conventionally called “Kingdom” but many theologians are uncomfortable with the colonial associations of God with King - God's perspective is like that.

Our Benjamin used to watch this outdoors nature guru named Coyote Peterson<sup>1</sup> - his claim to fame was to find the insects that delivered the most painful bites.

The worst sting in Peterson's experience came from the bullet ant. The pain, he stated, from its toxin caused hallucinations and intense pain that made him feel as if his arm had been dipped in lava! And the worst part is there is no anti-venom for either of them – you just have to sit it out.<sup>2</sup>

It is not a small ant – it is about an inch and a half long. Isn't it remarkable, though, in this world with its fierce and intimidating predators like the tiger or hippopotamus, that a tiny insect can make its presence known. Peterson will remember that bite for a long time!

To our Bible reading today, the version of the Bible story read today (the modern “Message” translation) used an acorn as an example of a small thing that becomes very big, oak tree. The actual symbol that Jesus apparently used in the original parable was the Mustard plant. That image can perplex us, because mustard plants are not at all large compared to other plants or trees that all start out as a tiny seed.

One scholar points out that the mustard plant, though we like mustard on our sandwiches, was considered a weed in ancient Palestinian culture. You just can't kill the thing; rather like the Jesus movement in that time. They were a profound annoyance to institutions of their time, even to the established Judaism, Jesus' “home faith community”.<sup>3</sup> The Jesus movement was a small but active bunch, yet it became an empire itself, which I'm guessing would have baffled Jesus if he could have seen what became of his followers.

That little group of eccentric followers of Jesus. Could we, the modern Church today, be comparable? Christianity used to be big and wielding great power, but now, we are a

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<sup>1</sup> Check out C Peterson's encounter with a bullet ant here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXjHb5QmDV0> . He has an unconventional approach to educate (primarily a child audience) about respecting animals and insects. The ethics of antagonizing insects is another discussion.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/> *Coyote Peterson: getting to know the man behind YouTube's biggest wildlife channel* published May 30, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Levan, Christopher, “God Hates Religion: How the Gospels Condemn False Religious Practice,” © 1995, United Church Publishing House

small vestige. Yet, could we be able to do more remarkable things because we are not big and imposing?

Let me explain:

We have referred to this before, how right here in Sudbury, in 1986, The United Church of Canada, during its denomination-wide meeting of General Council, made a formal apology to First Nations across Canada for our role in running Residential Schools that devastated Indigenous culture, language and spirituality. This was before most other implicated institutions were willing to open themselves to critique and legal action.

I share this, not to pat United Churches or their communities across Canada on the back. It was not without some serious education given by indigenous Elders like Alberta Billy, that the United Church of Canada found the courage to do this.<sup>4</sup>

These are parables describing what Jesus calls God's Kin-dom (or Kingdom). A surprising vision that defies human logic, and turns our sense of value in the world upside down.

The mustard seed, yeast, pearl, treasure, and the surprising haul of fish – reminding us of the story of the tired fishing folk who caught nothing, but the stranger on the shore who is actually the risen Christ, but they don't know it is him, he directs them to try one more time. Reluctantly they do, and there are so many fish in the net that the boat almost sinks. Remarkable. Surprising. Defying logic or what our world has taught us is "common sense".

That is the Creator's vision, according to Jesus – "God's Kin(g)dom is like these – a mustard seed so small, yet it grows to become home to an ecosystem. Yeast. Treasure found in the field, or a pearl found that compelled the finder to risk everything to get it.

So, think about small, or surprising things in our modern world that make you think about God's Kin-dom vision – that surprise you, that compel you to learn more about it. Any small or surprising things speak to you of the wonder of God's Kin-dom?

When I was a new minister in 1996 in a small town, there was a woman named Dorothy. She was very small, smaller than many of the youth who gravitated to her place, and she was frail, but feisty. When I think of the surprising truths of God's Kin-dom that turned my assumptions on their head, she speaks most powerfully.

Old, frail, not particularly well respected by the proper church folks in town, but she loved especially the youth who got in trouble with the law. If the police were investigating some kind of mischief in the community, a good guess was that Dorothy might be able to help. You need to understand that the rest of the community were, for

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<sup>4</sup> For more stories about the how Alberta Billy pushed The United Church of Canada to consider a formal Apology, see Broadview Magazine (Observer Publications Inc), "Opinion" by Stan McKay, June 24, 2021. "United Church's 1st Indigenous moderator on why UCC's apologies fell short: Stan McKay says statements acknowledged mistakes but racism persists." Online here: <https://broadview.org/united-church-residential-schools-apology/>

the most part, leery of some of the young people who respected Dorothy. Those youths on the margins towered over her, but her spirit was indomitable.

I'm thankful for reminders every day that God is revealed in surprising ways that humble us, that baffle us, that compel us to look a little more closely around us, and to be open to unlearning old assumptions, and opening our minds and hearts to new realities of God's wonder and love. Amen.