

I'm a great Sherlock Holmes fan. I'm intrigued by the deductive powers of reasoning he uses to solve complex mysteries. I recently read about the time Holmes and his faithful partner, Dr. Watson, went on a camping trip. They set up their tent and fell asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakened his friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?" Holmes asked.

Watson pondered for a minute and studiously replied, "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. What does it tell you?"

Holmes was silent for a moment, and then responded. "Watson, you idiot, it tells me someone has stolen our tent!"

Everyone loves a good story, even if it's a "groaner." Storytelling is one of the most powerful and entertaining means of communication. Whenever someone begins, "Once upon a time..." or, "In a galaxy far, far away," we're ready to sit back and listen.

Jesus was a master storyteller and regularly taught by telling stories that people could relate to. He knew there is power in a story that often surpasses the benefit of a finely crafted theological sermon. That's why we preachers use stories in sermons. People will remember a story illustrating a biblical truth much longer than the other words surrounding it. And we, like Dr. Watson, sometimes need help in grasping the obvious truth about us!

Today we begin a new series entitled "Tales for the Trails," four messages based upon parables Jesus taught his disciples long ago that still teach us how to live better lives. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, record around 40 parables of Jesus. John didn't include them in his gospel. Very often the gospel writer would begin, "And then he told them a parable..." the biblical equivalent to "once upon a time." Many would listen, but sadly some would still not fully understand. But for those of us who will listen and process what we hear, we can learn why a parable is called "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

The first parables we'll look at are the two we read today from Matthew. These short stories about a small mustard seed and a small portion of yeast illustrate a perspective on significance in God's Kingdom.

Just like Dr. Watson in my opening story, we tend to focus on bigness. We come to believe bigger is better, more is better than less. But Jesus is teaching not only that we shouldn't confuse size with significance, but also that important endings often result from seemingly trivial beginnings.

The mustard plant of Palestine differs from the mustard plant we know. The plant there does indeed grow to the size of a tree. The seed of the cypress tree is smaller, but the mustard seed was the proverbial example in the ancient Near East for smallness.

And everyone who baked understood how just a small portion of leaven could transform a dry, flat, tasteless bread into an enjoyable staple for every meal. Jesus

was making a point: in God's Kingdom what looks like weakness may ultimately result in strength and power. Little things mean a lot.

Jesus often referred to the significance of little things like the widow's mite, the one fallen sparrow, a cup of cold water, and the lilies of the field.

So, I asked myself, "What little things in our lives do we often relegate to unimportance or inattention because we don't grasp their significance?"

What in our lives is so small in its beginnings and yet so large in its consequences?" Let's think about it together.

What comes to mind **first** is the value of **our faith in God**, no matter how small. None of us has perfect faith and we've probably often compared ourselves to some perceived "giant of the faith," like Billy Graham, and felt inadequate. But no matter when or how we came to our Christian faith, it began small. Yet even the smallest, quietest confession of faith in God's love and forgiveness for us in Christ brings us into the presence of God for all eternity.

Yes, we want to grow in our faith, but growth takes time and diligence.

We need to know it's the moments of **prayer and study** that become helpful habits of devotion bringing us God's wisdom and strength for daily living.

It's the moments of **worship and praise** with fellow believers, even with little faith, that bring us to the commitment of our whole lives.

Jesus blesses our faith at whatever level of growth we are. He hears and understands the prayers of the heart without the "stained glass" words. I believe this parable teaches us never to underestimate the power of anyone's faith. It may even be the small, struggling faith that will make the greatest witness to others.

In the familiar hymn we opened with today, *My Faith Looks up to Thee*, the first verse goes:

"My faith looks up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine!

Now hear me while I pray, Take all my guilt away,

O let me from this day be wholly Thine!" (UMH # 452)

In 1830, at age 22, the author, Ray Palmer, wanted to go into the ministry but had to remain in a teaching assignment. He was lonely, depressed and sick. He found a German poem about a sinner kneeling before the cross. He translated it and added four stanzas. He never intended it to be published. It was a statement of his own simple faith.

Two years later Palmer saw Lowell Mason, a major figure in American music in the early 1800's, who was preparing a new hymnal and he asked Palmer if he'd like to contribute anything. Palmer bashfully showed Mason the verses. After reading the words, Mason sincerely responded, "You may live many years and do many good things, but I think you will be best known to posterity as the author of *My Faith Looks up to Thee*."

When we trust in God as best we know how, God will respond to deepen our own faith and in turn help others to grow. That's the way of the mustard seed.

A **second** thing that comes to mind when I think of the value of small things that seem insignificant is **the choices we make**. Our choices may seem small at the time, but can have far reaching consequences.

It begins when a person chooses something right when he/she had the power to choose something wrong, and then do it again and again, often guided by the wisdom of faith, parents, mentors or friends. As Dante said, "Virtue is a habit of right choices."

Conversely, if a person chooses wrong when he/she has the power to choose right, they find it easier the next time to choose wrong. It's easier still to choose wrong the third time because the sense of shame begins to disappear.

The habit of wrong choices becomes—bad character. The temptation to "do it just this once" is a dangerous and terrible one, for again, these little things mean a lot. The cumulative consequence of the little choices we make, good or bad, is something big. The truth is, we make our choices and then our choices make us.

As I said earlier, I usually like to include a story or illustration for a point of a message, but instead of me adding mine about choices, I want you to add yours. Take a moment and bring to mind a person, maybe a friend, a family member, even yourself, where one small choice from some time ago made a big difference: "the road taken or not taken" as Robert Frost wrote. Personal choices concerning finances, relationships, jobs, friends, habits, and yes, even God, determine our future.

If this person you're thinking of, by the grace of God, made good choices, take a moment to thank God: asking God to continue to bless and guide the person.

If this person made poor choices, take a moment and pray for that person: asking God to bring restoration and even good out of any negative situation.

(Pause)

Let's never forget to pray for ourselves, our friends, and our families that God's Spirit within would grant us wisdom and courage to make good choices in life, even when they seem minor. We can't do it alone. The Spirit within is like yeast, working invisibly, yet bringing bountiful results over time.

The **third** thing I think of when considering size and significance is **the value and potential of one person.**

In "The Last Days Newsletter," Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies."

Just like other aspects of the Kingdom of God, life starts from the smallest of beginnings, but no one knows what it will become. We aren't "born" leaders or followers, good guys or criminals, winners or losers. We are born little babies with the potential to change the world for good or evil.

As I mentioned, our faith and our choices are important in fulfilling our best potential, but we must first know and understand we are loved and valued by God for who we are, with all our little strengths and big limitations. Dr. Watson's theological observations that the Lord is all-powerful and we are small were accurate, but that does not mean we are insignificant.

The Bible and history are full of examples of one person accomplishing great things from small beginnings.

Cecil Northcott tells in one of his books how a multinational group of young people was discussing how the Christian gospel might be spread. They discussed all kinds of big evangelistic tactics. Then one girl from Africa spoke up saying, "When we want to take Christianity to one of our villages we don't send them books, tracts, or preachers. We take a Christian family and send them to live in the village. They make the village Christian by just living there."

In any group or society, in a school or factory, in a shop or office, again and again, it's the witness or the kindness of one individual which influences others and makes Christianity real—or not. It's truly the "power of one." YOU are the "one" God wants to work through, wherever God has placed you.

So, remember: as you contemplate your faith, your choices, and your purposes in this life consider how God's value system differs from that of the world. God employs otherwise insignificant people, seemingly inconsequential events, and lackluster numbers to accomplish His purposes.

Why? Because little is much when God is in it.

That's the way of the yeast and the mustard seed.