

Treasure Island: Simple Treasures

Mark 4:26-34

July 9, 2006

We're not accustomed to seeing the mustard seed from whence comes the mustard we put on our hot dogs and hamburgers. Most of us aren't close to the land where the farmer plants the seeds, waters them, and watches them grow. We don't see the farm equipment and laborers who harvest the mustard seed to take them to the mill to be processed. We aren't familiar with the factory where the seed is crushed, mixed with water, vinegar or honey, and bottled. We simply open the jar or pull off the cap and squeeze the bottle with nary a thought of the mustard seed which began the whole process.

It is somewhat symbolic of America's obsession with size, with bigness, and with large quantities. We abide by the assumption that big is better. In recent years some people have made what could be described as pilgrimages to the Mall of America in Minnesota. It is not because there is merchandise that cannot be found elsewhere. It is not because stuff is cheaper there. It is because bigger is better, and the Mall of America is the biggest mall in the country. The Mall has over 520 stores employing over 12,000 people. The Mall is one of the most popular destinations in the country, ranking right up there with Disney World, Graceland, and the Grand Canyon.

Fast food chains have courted customers by offering the option of "super-sizing" your meal or getting a double or triple whopping big burger. One convenience store offers an "extreme" mug that can be filled with 52 ounces of your favorite soda (that's equivalent to 4-1/2 cans).

SUV's keep getting bigger, and people assume (wrongly) that bigger means not just better but safer. Some satellite-TV networks offer no less than 500 channels, even if nothing is showing on some channels.

If you can put the prefix "mega-" in front of something, it is a good bet that it will become hot. Megastore, Megaplex, Megamall, Megachannels, and yes, Mega-church. People assume that if they are big they must be successful and if they are successful, they must be the best at whatever it is they do. This mentality infects our thinking so much that we end up feeling sorry for small businesses, the independent bookstore, the tiny country church, small car owners, the cracker box house.¹

This super-size mentality would be very foreign to Jesus, for he spoke not of mega-seeds, but of nano-seeds. In his parables Jesus says that it is the small things that speak to us of the presence of God in our lives. The

kingdom of God is not advertised on a glitzy neon sign towering over Times Square; rather, it is the treasure buried beneath the dirt in the field. It is not an expensive jewel displayed under plate glass and bright lights at a department store on Fifth Avenue; it is the pearl of great price that someone just happens to stumble upon in an unlikely place. The kingdom does not call attention to itself like a marching band coming down the street with brass blaring and drums beating; instead it is like the yeast that disappears into the larger lump of dough. It is the tiniest of seeds that vanishes almost the very moment it hits the soil.

In a baccalaureate address at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, Bill Moyers told the Jewish tale about Shalom Aleichem, a Job-like figure who experienced every misfortune imaginable, but nevertheless went about his life returning good for evil. His reputation for goodness was so hailed in heaven that when he arrived there all the angels and the Lord were present to greet him. Shalom was told that whatever he might wish for would be granted him. All he wanted was that every day in heaven begins with a hot buttered roll. The angels and even the Lord wept at the beauty of the simple thing he requested. A buttered roll, a clean bed, a beautiful summer day, someone to love and be loved by. These simple things supply joy and meaning on this earthly journey.² We might call them nano-treasures. They are the small gems in life which are rich with meaning.

The June issue of *National Geographic* has an article about nanotechnology. We may be most familiar with the device known as an iPod Nano. Nano is a prefix that means “dwarf” in Greek. It is shorthand for nanometer, one-billionth of a meter: a distance so minute that comparing it to anything in the regular world is a bit of a joke. For example, the nail on your little finger is about ten million nanometers across. Nano means small, tiny, minute. Nanotechnology is important because familiar materials begin to develop odd properties when they’re nanosize. Scientists can use them to engineer an abundance of exotic new materials, such as plastic that conducts electricity and coatings that prevent iron from rusting. A new revolution is beginning because scientists are able to break things down to nanoparticles and create something new.³

Like scientists, Jesus knew the incredible ability of simple things to transform lives. He would have liked the book title, *Small is Beautiful*. Take a moment to wonder about some of the simple things. A baby’s smile communicates unconditional love. The unfolding petals of a rose. The colorful wings of a ladybug. A handmade gift from a friend. A painting by a child. A jazzy song. A note of praise. A glass of lemonade on a hot summer day. These simple things are the treasures that enrich our lives, for

they are the miracles of beauty, life, and love. Mega isn't always where meaning is found; nano is more likely where it's at.

Jesus teaches that tiny beginnings can have great endings. What seems insignificant in our own time will ultimately be triumphant because God works in ways that we do not see. Our challenge is to wait and trust that God is at work bringing the harvest.

In order to go nano, we need to stop the frantic speed in which most of us live and slow down. Stop and smell the roses. Remember the seed from whence the mustard came. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, has written: *I like to walk alone on country paths, the plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or thin air, but to walk on earth.*⁴

I like the story about another Buddhist monk who was visiting New York. He was told by his Western host that they could save ten minutes by making a complex transfer in the subway at Grand Central Station. When they emerged from the underground in Central Park, the monk sat down on a bench. His host wanted to know what he was doing. "I thought we should enjoy the ten minutes," the monk replied.⁵

How long has it been since we have stopped for ten minutes simply to be, to observe our surroundings, to wonder at the world around us, to enjoy the time we have? It is not a very long time, but it is enough time to ponder the simple treasures that enrich our lives and fill them with meaning and joy.

May we delight in the nano-things, the small parts, the simple treasures of life.

¹ Scott Hoezee, "Mystery Seeds," www.calvincrc.org/sermons. Referenced by *Lectionary Homiletics*, July 2006, p. 28.

² Bill Moyers, www.hamilton.edu, retrieved July 6, 2006. Quoted in *Christian Century*, June 13, 2006, pp. 6-7.

³ Jennifer Kahn, "Nanotechnology," *National Geographic*, June 2006, pp. 100-104.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Walking Meditation* (Nyack, NY: Fellowship Publications, 1985). Quoted in *Weavings*, May/June 1990, pp. 33-34.

⁵ *American Scholar*, Winter 2006, quoted in *Christian Century*, May 2, 2006, pp. 6-7.

The Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA