

"Small Ones Can Change the World"

Matthew 13:31-33

I have always loved Jesus use of the mustard seed to describe the Kingdom of God. Being a gardener the reminder of the miracle of seeds is a great story of encouragement. Jesus wanted to teach us that in God's way of thinking, you don't have to be big and powerful to make a difference in the world. That story resounds as we celebrate Christmas in July where we celebrate the birth of the Christ-child. A bringer of hope and joy to many, even as an infant. Christmas is the story of God coming to us in small packages.

Jesus is the most celebrated, but he is not the only child in the scriptures to make a difference. Some of the most important people in scripture were children and young people. Though they were young, their faith and bravery made a big difference in the world. People like Samuel, who was chosen by God at an early age to become a Priest and to help rid the people of some corrupt Religious leaders who were stealing offerings meant for God and using their position of power for personal gain. When he was older, Samuel was the Priest who anointed King David, who was also introduced in scripture as a young shepherd boy, whose faith in God helped him overcome a giant, and led him to become a great King. What about young Miriam, Moses' sister who save his life when he was floating in the basket down the Nile River. Her action ensured that God's great deliverer would help free the enslaved people of Israel. And she herself grows to be a great leader of the people of Israel.

We as a culture sometimes forget that children can make a great difference in the world, though, like their parents, they are human – they sometimes make mistakes. Like the young men who were walking home from Sunday School talking about the temptation of Christ. One boy asked the other, "Do you believe that stuff about the devil? Do you think he really exists?" The other boy looked at him and said, "Nah, it's just like Santa Claus– it's really your Dad."

Well, in spite of occasional misunderstanding, throughout history, children and young people have shown tremendous moral courage and have made this world a better place. At the 39th Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. in June 1966 this was shown in the fourth round of the contest, when Rosalie Elliot, then an 11 year old from South Carolina was asked to spell avowal. In her soft Southern accent she spelled it. But did the 7th grader use an a or an e as the next to the last letter? The judges couldn't decide. For several minutes they listened to the tape recordings, but the critical letter was accent-blurred. Chief Judge John Lloyd finally put the question to the only person who knew the answer, "Was the letter an a or was it an e?" he asked Rosalie. Surrounded by the whispering young spellers, Rosalie knew by now the correct spelling of the word. Without hesitating, she replied she had misspelled it. She walked from the stage. The entire audience stood and applauded, including much of the press, one of whom was heard to remark that Judge Lloyd had put quite a burden on the 11 year old. What a proud moment that must have been for her parents.

Back in 1960, six year old Ruby Bridges was another young person who did the right thing in a difficult situation. Ruby was one of the children that integrated Alabama's schools in a very tumultuous time. As is recorded in Norman Rockwell's very famous painting, The Problem We All Live With every day she would go to school surrounded by Federal Marshals, huge crowds of people, many of whom would scream at the children, give hateful looks, throw rotten tomatoes and try to block her way. One day early on little Ruby was still the only one in her classroom. As she worked at her desk her teacher asked her how she could walk through that crowd every day? Ruby thought for a moment and said, "I just pray for the people who are yelling at me all the way here and all the way home." Ruby Bridges reminds us you can be six years old and still change the world.

In 2008, Central Oregon University's softball team was playing in a do or die playoff game against the Western Oregon University. Western Oregon's Senior Sara Tucholsky, a 5'2" line drive hitter, hit her first-ever career home run. She was so excited she missed touching first base, and when she turned back to do so, she tore her ACL, and fell to the ground. Sara crawled to first base and hugged it unable to complete her trip around the bases. The umpires and the coaches were unsure what to do. If any of her team helped her, Sara would be called out. They could substitute a player for her, but the home run would be erased and become a single. That would have taken a run away, but certainly as important to Sara, leaving her short of reaching 5h3 life long goal of hitting a home run. The coaches and the umpires didn't know what to do, but opposing player, Mallory Holtman, who had hit more home runs in their conference than anyone in its history had an idea. "Can we pick her up and carry her around the bases?" she asked the home plate umpire. With a look of surprise he said, "Yes, there's no rule against that." So Holtman and teammate, Liz Wallace carried Sarah Tucholsky around the bases. Mallory Holtman and Liz Wallace's team CWU lost the game to Sara's Western Oregon team, ending their softball careers. Sara's injury ended hers as well, but these three young people changed the world with a simple act of decency and sportswomanship.

How many of us remember back in June of 1989 when students in China were challenging their government in Tiananmen Square. Though hundreds exhibited courage perhaps the best known was a young student who made that mighty nation, indeed the whole world, pause for a moment when he was videotaped standing in the way of a column of tanks. When they tried to go around him, he moved again to block their path. That man was never identified, but his courage and willingness to risk everything to help bring freedom and justice to his nation will be long remembered in our hearts and minds.

The Christmas story and Jesus' parable of the mustard seed assures us that no matter how small we are, or how seemingly insignificant our actions, we can make a difference in this world on behalf of God. Whether we were born at home or born to a family relocated by an oppressive government, we can make a difference. No matter how old or young, rich or poor, socially empowered or socially scorned, the small seeds of kindness and love that we sow can grow into a wondrous miracle. Oh, sometimes we may not see the results, but as with a pearl, an act of loving kindness as tiny as a grain of sand may someday become a pearl of great size. AMEN

Matthew 13:31-33 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

The Parable of the Yeast

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."