

Tending What's Small

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 13:31-33
on September 24, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. We're back with Jesus in the parables, in these two tiny stories folded into the sweep of the rest. And as we've seen and will continue to discover throughout the fall, Jesus often used language of the "kingdom of God" in his parables, comparing these narratives to what the kingdom might be like. Of course, language of "kingdom" might sound a bit stodgy to our American ears in the absence of a monarchy, but the "*basileia tou theou*" or the "kingdom of God" – or Matthew's take on this, "the kingdom of heaven," means the reign of God, the way of God's dream for this world. I have a new translation of the New Testament that is becoming a deeply-moving favorite called the First Nations Version, an indigenous translation of the New Testament by native North Americans. Here, "the kingdom of heaven" is translated "the good road from above."¹*

*The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a towering tree to extend rest and care. The good road from above is like the yeast a grandmother uses when she makes frybread dough, mixing a little in, spreading it throughout, and watching it rise. **The kingdom of heaven starts small.***

II.

We're paying attention today to size, turning our eyes and ears toward that which is small. It seems that many of us are discovering with renewed imagination for the small things. Tiny houses and micro-dwellings are splashed across Zillow and the pages of *Architectural Digest*. You can hardly go

¹ *First Nations Version*, Matthew 13:31-33.

out to eat without being offered a menu of small plates to begin and orient your meal. One of the hottest tickets in Manhattan isn't just to *Hamilton*, but rather to the Miniature Art Museum, the first of its kind in the world to exclusively feature miniatures all throughout the space. These kinds of things are what my mother-in-law would call the small things, "cute and little," which ... who doesn't like that which is cute and little?!

Yet for those first hearers of Jesus' parables, I wonder if they were perplexed. The kingdom of heaven is like a handful of yeast and a mustard seed? The **kingdom?** Of **heaven?** A seed and some grains? I've got to think that these folks heard Jesus and were certain he had to be mistaken.

And yet. These are the people that knew from their history, heard the stories, handed down the traditions of what God does with the small things – small nations, small families, small people, small meals, with a still small voice, or small babies. A small nation becomes Israel. A small family becomes the family through which all nations shall be blessed. Small people that become prophets and leaders, and a small meal that becomes a feast for thousands. A still small voice becomes the north star of faithful lives. A small baby becomes the Messiah who we wait for, the Messiah who changes the world. God is in the business of taking that which is small and enlarging its impact. So it's worth our time and energy today, with mustard seeds and yeast on our minds, to think a bit about how we tend that which is small.

III.

Consider that which is small and simple.

I can't help but to think of practices or habits when I think of tending that which is small and simple. One of my favorite recent teachers on this topic is James Clear, whose book, *Atomic Habits*, speaks to it, for this is how

habits are formed.² They aren't formed by grand gestures, rather tending habits start small! What mug you pour your coffee into in the morning, how you make your bed, what shoes you wear to the gym, what you do in the last 20 minutes of your day, you name it. Small, simple practices, done consistently over time have the power to change your life, he tells us! No matter the size or the scale of the thing you're working toward, each of these habits are compact yet potent, shifting us ever so slowly and simply toward the person we want to become. It's a compelling pitch, right? No wonder the book has sold 15 million copies!

Consider that which is small and mighty.

Again from James Clear, the other side of these atomic habits suggests that the small, simple practices, when layered on top of each other over time, makes for a mighty impact. Writing a book happens one sentence at a time. Learning to make a new meal happens one ingredient at a time. And as the quote says, "a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step."³ One sentence, one ingredient, one step at a time... layered, leads to a book, a meal, a journey that is transformative. We can think of good habits that stack one atop another and lead to a mighty impact, but let's also remember the old saying, "death by a thousand paper cuts." Sometimes the small things add up and strip us of life.

An example: Another author, another commitment to that which is small. Back in 1973, it was German-born author E. F. Schumacher who used his voice to press back against creeping industrialization and unchecked capitalism with his book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Into the "bigger is better" ethos, Schumacher's voice was downright radical.

² James Clear, *Atomic Habits*.

³ Chinese proverb attributed to Lao Tzu.

Yet it was from his ideas that movements of fair trade and buying local became widely sought out.

Consider that which is small and hard. You know what it feels like when a tiny grain of sand is stuck unwanted between your toes. Covid 19 is a tiny virus, undetectable by the human eye. Bacteria, a bullet, a black widow spider, a cell, a microbe, a tiny little lie – all diminutive in size yet significant in impact. Small isn't always simple, for sometimes small is hard.

Author Richard Carlson understood this, for when a mentor of his responded to a particular stress Richard has, his mentor told him the two rules of living in harmony: #1, don't sweat the small stuff, and #2, it's all small stuff. He related with this encouragement so fully that the advice slipped onto the cover, and Carlson's book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, became a phenomenon that spent over 100 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, still one of the fastest selling books of all time.⁴

Finally, consider that which is small and inconspicuous. That which is small isn't just small and simple, or small and mighty, or small and hard, it's inconspicuous, can be easily overlooked or tucked away.

Think of the story of the princess and the pea – where once upon a time, there was a prince who sought out a princess to marry, but had to make sure she was a real princess. Here and there and everywhere he traveled to find the one, but he simply couldn't be sure the princesses he met were real. One stormy night back at the castle, a terrible storm rained down around them, yet through the din, the king heard a knocking at the door. He answered, and there was a woman – drenched and flung about by the storm, but claiming to be a princess. The queen had her doubts about the woman's

⁴ Information available on Richard Carlson's Wikipedia page.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Carlson_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Carlson_(author))

claim, and so before they offered her a place to stay in the castle, the queen went into the guest bedroom, took all the bedding off, and laid a pea at the very bottom. She then piled twenty mattresses on top, and twenty feather beds on top of the mattresses. Only a true princess would be able to feel the pea, the queen thought.

The next morning, the queen asked the princess, “how did you sleep?” To which she responded, “Oh, very badly!” said she. “I have scarcely closed my eyes all night. Heaven only knows what was in the bed, but I was lying on something hard, so that I am black and blue all over my body. It’s horrible!”

And with that they knew she was a real princess, because, in the words of the storyteller, Hans Christian Anderson, “nobody but a real princess could be as sensitive as that.”⁵

IV.

That which is small can be simple or mighty, hard or inconspicuous. That mustard seed, you know, grows into a towering shrub, and birds of the air find their rest within. That mustard bush, you know, can be considered a noxious weed, one unwanted by many who find it in their fields. That yeast, you know, is folded in,⁶ tucked away, hidden until the bread starts to rise. To God, the kingdom starts small. But in God’s kingdom, nothing – especially not the small! – is wasted or discarded or overlooked. Nothing is left behind or deemed unworthy of redemption. No one is left to manage the mighty or the hard on their own! No one is inconspicuous to a God who sees us in fullest view: beloved, worthy, and very very good. To God, even though we may be small, that which is small – like humans or seeds or yeast – is able to be held

⁵ Hans Christian Anderson, *The Princess and the Pea*.

⁶ I can never think of folding an ingredient into a mixture without thinking of David and Moira Rose from the fabulous show, *Schitt’s Creek*, who wonder how to “fold in” the cheese. It is an instant classic.

and gathered together, like sprinkles of yeast or handfuls of seeds or people gathered into holy community. Mostly, that which is small holds endless power for transformation.

The kingdom of God starts small!

So friends, I'd like us to consider today how we tend to the small things in our life. What are the small and simple things in your life that could thrive under your thoughtful attention? What small practices would develop into mighty, meaningful ways to live your life if you gave them some intention? What small and hard things would lighten by letting others or letting God shoulder the burden with you? What is small and inconspicuous in your life that you'd rather not notice, but actually needs your attention? What if you tended to the small relationships, the small tasks, the small places in your life – like the daily walk, the simple prayer, the minutes of gratitude, the gentle tasks of helping another? What if you consider the small places in your life that God might transform into things of deeper impact? Where is the still small voice of God calling you in this season? Tending what's small will impact our individual lives, of course, but I wonder if tending what's small might give us a window into no less than the kingdom of God!

The Zulus have a name for God: *uNkulunkulu*, which translates as Big-Big. When poet Pádraig Ó Tuama learned this and shared it with a farmer friend of his named Emma, Emma related to it, sharing that when she prays to God, she prays to the Bigness. Yet, as she adds, "The Bigness is also The Smallness, and that each can hold the other."⁷

V.

⁷ Pádraig Ó Tuama, *In the Shelter*, p126.

I've told you before the story of Winkler Bakery, just down the street from us in Old Salem. At Winkler's, all manner of homemade treats have risen from this bakery since it was first opened in the year 1800. Wrinkled hands of wise bakers fashion mounds of sugar- and butter-infused dough into what will become sugar cake. Young apprentices knead the paper-thin folds of ginger spice and molasses into the tray from which hundreds of the classic Moravian cookie will be formed. The old dome 'beehive' oven reaches its peak of 500 degrees before cooling a bit in order to receive its bread for the day. Baking techniques more than 200 years in the making persist, grounding the daily work of mixing and molding, whisking and waiting.

That challenge of waiting for the yeast to rise is one every baker must contend with. But as the old legend tells it – at Winkler's, *these tiny particles that make yeast are simply hidden in the air*, leavening the work, the dough, the creations day after day, week after week, year after year; leavening the possibility of what you might discover folded into bread and cake; leavening what is small, simple, inconspicuous into that which is mighty.⁸ Small, tucked away, yet necessary for the work of rising.

VI.

The kingdom of heaven starts small. It is made real when you search it out, stumble upon it, practice it, bring it to light. And best of all – it's as available to you as a handful of yeast or a tiny little seed, deceptively small, occasionally hidden, simple or mighty or hard or inconspicuous, yet filled with possibility to become visible and great. The kingdom of heaven can be discovered all around you. Like the yeast at Winkler Bakery, the kingdom of

⁸ Story told to me by Rev. Scott Dickison. Further illumination about Winkler Bakery from this wonderful story and video found here:

<https://www.ourstate.com/unearthed-winkler-bakery-offers-sweet-history-lesson/>

God is already in the air. It's that small. It's that transformative. Can you see it? Amen!