

The Start of Something Big

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *Jeremiah 29:10-14; Mark 4:1-9, 30-32*

In James Michener's classic historical novel, *Hawaii*, the great storyteller begins his tale at the beginning. The very beginning. He starts with imagining the central Pacific without the islands of Hawaii. And postulates the tens of millions of years it took for these small masses of land to emerge. The volcanic activity of the ocean floor. The emerging mountains of molten rock. The descending glaciers of the ice age. And then finally the islands begin to emerge and peak their heads above the oceanic waters. Michener then imagines how long it must have been – tens of thousands of years – before anything resembling life began to form on those volcanic islands. And he imagines the day when upon this barren rock, lands a bird, some tropical bird which by the help of the Pacific wind currents – has likely flown off course and drifted to these islands. From some previous vegetative feast this bird happens to bear inside a seed or two left over from the digestion of some exotic plant. And through nature's calling these seeds along with their accompanying fertilizer are deposited and one of these seeds even manages to trickle down into some crevice where there is just enough soil into which it embeds itself. The rain and the sun do their part and the seed germinates. A plant grows. Seeds form at the end of stalks. And the wind scatters the seed to other crevices. More germination. And what results over the next series of millennia are what we now know as the islands of Hawaii. Islands to which I have never been, but according to reports are quite beautiful. A paradise, they say. A place where close to 10 million tourists make restorative pilgrimage every year. And all from a tiny seed. The start, shall we say, of something big.

You know when Jesus was looking to explain to his followers and listeners about the power of the kingdom of God he didn't have to look very far to find the perfect metaphor. Walking up and down the dusty roads of Palestine watching farmers do their thing, plowing, planting, watering, harvesting their crops it didn't take long for it to dawn on him that the idea of a seed carries with it the amazing lesson of what the kingdom of God can do. We need only to look out our northern doors and see this great live oak that branches across the center of our campus and think back to over 200 years and imagine that somehow, somehow a seed found its way into the soil – a seed no bigger than the tip of my finger – and out of this tiny little part of creation came this massive, lovely, stately tree that shadows us from the sun and gathers us as the people of God. All from a seed this big.

And so as to make his point Jesus goes as far as to find for himself a mustard seed – the tiniest of all the seeds – and points out the botany – that from the tiniest of all the seeds comes the largest of all the shrubs. And while mustard seed plants may not make it as big as a live oak, the truth of the matter is --- something really big can come from something small. And that the further truth of the matter is when you are imagining what God can do in his power – you need only to look around you and see what God already does with his power – the universe is full of God's power and that the power is found not as much in the biggest of all things, but in the smallest of all things.

A couple of weeks ago the world was put on watch when the news from North Korea was that they had tested underground a Hydrogen bomb. Now I know absolutely nothing about thermonuclear bombs – nothing except that somewhere at the start of something so potentially destructive is the splitting of an atom. An atom. Something you cannot see with your naked eye. And when something that small is divided into something smaller – a massive amount of energy is released. Harnessing the energy of this is what creates bombs

that can destroy cities and civilizations and also create electricity to light the homes of millions.

So Jesus says something really big gets its start with something really small. And because he's talking about the kingdom of God he is talking about the love and grace and hope that God has for our lives. That, as real as the force may be that comes from the seed and the atom, so real is the force that comes from that same creator who is the generator of love and grace and hope. It only takes something small for God to do something big in our lives – to give us just a little bit of love, a little bit of grace, a little bit of hope.

Victor Frankl in his moving account of survival in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II remembered one freezing night when he was ordered to pointlessly

and he ended up writing one of the great masterpieces of the 20th century, *Man's Search for Meaning*. It only takes something small for God to do something big in our lives – to give us just a little bit of love, a little bit of grace, a little bit of hope, a little bit of light, a little bit of life.

So the word of God comes through Jeremiah to the people of Israel in exile. These people who have been waiting far too long to be given their home back. These people who have been told over and over again by their captors to give up hope. The word of the Lord comes from Jeremiah and he says, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." This is, isn't it, the kingdom of God -- that the power of the universe

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dig in the frozen ground. He was beyond despair and wondered if he could make it even through the night when he looked up and through the prison fence long in the distance he noticed a light go on in a farmhouse. Just one little light. And Frankl said to himself, light does shine in the darkness. Spurred by this little bit of hope Frankl began thinking of his wife who had been taken from him to another camp. He thought so deeply of her he could feel her presence and as he felt this presence suddenly a bird, a little bird flew silently down and perched in front of him and stared at him for the longest time. A little bit of light, a little bit of life, and it inspired him to hold on – and he did and he survived

is in this God who yearns for our welfare, who desires no harm, who eagerness is to give us a future with hope. Just a tiny seed it takes, just a tiny hope to hold onto, just a faith in the grace and hope of God, for the greatest of things to happen. It all starts with a seed.

But every seed, of course, needs its soil. And so Jesus is good to tell us not only of the power of the seed but of the nature of the soil. That every seed needs its soul. Every potential of the kingdom needs a soul in which to embed itself. And Jesus tells us that God is this gracious farmer who isn't stingy with his seed. He will

throw it anywhere. Anywhere where that seed might have a chance. The hard soil, the rocky soil, the thorny soil all on its way to the good soil.

A long time ago when I was wrestling with this passage I went to a landscape contractor in my congregation to ask him what might a good soil consist of. And for the next fifteen minutes I heard a lecture on soil nutrients: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, potassium, phosphorous, calcium and on and on he went till I got dizzy. And then, almost as an aside, he said something that finally made all the sense in the world. Said he, “You know you can have all those things, at just the right balance, but it won’t make a bit of difference unless the soil is broken.” “Broken?” said I. “Yes,” said he, “Unless the soil is tilled. Unless the soil is disked. Unless the soil is cultivated. Unless the seed can find a good roughed up soil, it’s never going to grow.”

Of course.

Because of course how would the kingdom of God make its way into our souls except through those broken places? Those cracks in our lives. Those wounds that go deep. Those gaps between who we are and what we want to be. If there is any chance the kingdom of God has in us it in those places broken by life. Those places maybe where we have been roughed up a bit. That soil that has been disked deep. You know what I am talking about. Maybe you have been broken a bit by grief, family issues, a loss of employment, a turn in health, depression, addiction, divorce, a downturn in the economy.

Anne Lamott, the profound Christian writer, talks about her descent into depression and drug abuse before her spiritual awakening and said, “I was cracking up. I was cracking up. But the cracks are where the light gets in.” And Jesus would add - the cracks are where the seed gets in.

I lived and pastored in Philadelphia for a while and while I was there the Phillies had a player named Jim Eisenreich. Eisenreich was one of those really good

players that you’ll never see in the Hall of Fame. And while he was with the Phillies he put together a couple of really good seasons. And while all that was good it isn’t what Jim Eisenreich cared most about. Because what Jim Eisenreich cared most about were kids who suffered from a neurological disorder called Tourette’s syndrome. Most of us have heard of this condition that provokes in a person involuntary movements and sounds that can be quite embarrassing and debilitating. Jim Eisenreich had a heart for kids afflicted with this condition, because of course he – the Major League baseball player – was afflicted with the same. Right smack dab in the middle of his baseball career came this syndrome that shook this deeply religious man to the core. This condition he hated and he fought and he despaired over. Until the day came when he it dawned on him, “Maybe the greatest gift God gives us the gift of unanswered prayer. Maybe this is the very thing my life is supposed to be about.” And so inside the crack, inside the broken, roughed up place of his life – a seed fell. And Jim Eisenreich, baseball player, realized that there were two things he needed to do – play the best baseball he could, so he could spend the rest of his time giving kids, Tourette’s kids, the inspiration to deal with their condition. And so every month while he played baseball, and in a different town on the schedule, Jim Eisenreich would buy a section of seats in the stadium and invite kids from the local Tourette’s support groups to come to the game and after the game the Major League player would spend time with them and tell them there was hope. Today he runs the Jim Eisenreich Foundation for Children with Tourette’s Syndrome. Only through the cracks can the light shine. Only through the cracks can the seed fall.

Maybe you remember the name Tony Melendez. Tony Melendez was the Nicaraguan boy who was born with no arms. His family immigrated to East Los Angeles and for whatever reason he decided that maybe he could learn to play the guitar with his feet. And so he did. He didn’t just learn to play the guitar with his feet;

he turned out to be better with his feet than most were with their hands. When it was announced that Pope John Paul II would visit Los Angeles during his United States tour, Tony was invited to play for the Pope. And so before a crowd of hundreds of thousands, Tony, broken Tony – played his guitar. And the visibly moved Pope wrapped him in his arms. In his book, Tony recalls, “After the concert I walked backstage through the waiting crowd of old friends and new ... At the back of the crowd I saw a badly deformed young woman in a wheelchair. Her arms and legs were twisted, but she smiled and tried to wave as I passed. I kept walking toward the exit; then I stopped, turned around, and walked back in her direction. When she saw me standing beside her, her eyes filled with tears. She reached her hand out toward me and struggled to speak, ‘Tony,’ she said, ‘because of you, we all have hope.’”

And some of the seed fell on the good soil, the broken soil, the disked deep soil – and it yielded thirty, sixty, a hundred fold. Lord knows where your cracks come from. But one thing is for sure: you have them. You can’t really live in this world without getting roughed up a bit. Some of the cracks are big, some are small.

And isn’t that the good news? That from the smallest seeds come the biggest trees. That the kingdom of God in its tiniest form – the love of God, the grace of God, the hope of God in its smallest visage – is more than enough power to bring about the greatest of all life. And that all the cracks, all the broken places, all the roughed up spots of our souls – is the very soil for God to start his greatest thing.



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Church of the Palms

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