

Ezekiel 17:22-24

Matthew 13:31-33

July 16, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

HIDDEN FIGURES

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

After we worshiped here on Christmas morning, we went home, ate lunch, and settled in around the Christmas tree in the living room. We connected with Natalie in Seoul via FaceTime and started opening presents. Jackson handed me a present from Nancy. I opened it and found a stainless steel kitchen digital scale. I must have had a puzzled look on my face, because Nancy said, “There’s another present that goes with it.” When I opened the other gift, I found a cookbook titled *The Elements of Pizza: Unlocking the Secrets to World-Class Pies at Home*. Since then, I’ve been trying my hand at making pizzas from scratch. So far, they’ve all been edible, but not all have been pretty!

I have been using the recipe for a Single Dough Ball. The digital scale comes in handy, since the cooking instructions are very exact. The entire process for making the dough takes about eight hours, most of which time the dough is just sitting on a plate. The recipe calls for 116 grams of water (about 1/2 cup), 166 grams of flour (1 1/3 cups), 5 grams of sea salt (1 teaspoon), and 1/10 of 1/4 of a teaspoon of instant dried yeast. Yep, you heard me right — 1/10 of 1/4 of a teaspoon of yeast! My digital scale doesn’t measure amounts that tiny, so I have to eyeball it in a measuring spoon, which is really kind of hard to do.

Crunch the numbers and you discover that in the combination of the yeast and the flour, the yeast accounts for just 6/10,000 of 1% of the dough recipe. And yet, if you leave it out, the dough will be flat and tasteless. According to Ken Forkish, the author of the pizza cookbook, there are about 15,000,000,000 (billion with a B!) viable yeast cells in one teaspoon of instant dried yeast. That means there are approximately 375,000,000 viable yeast cells in 1/10 of 1/4 of a teaspoon of instant dried yeast! When I mix the water, sea salt, flour, and yeast together and let it ferment for eight hours, I can’t see those yeast cells at work, as they eat the sugars and release carbon dioxide to make the dough rise and the pizza crust puffy and tasty. But they’re hard at work, hidden deep and throughout that ball of dough.

And that, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like: “It’s like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures (about 60 pounds) of flour until all of it was leavened.” If that woman was using the pizza cookbook measurements, she would have hidden 18 teaspoons of yeast in about 3,480 teaspoons of flour. 18 teaspoons is certainly a lot more than 1/10 of 1/4 of a teaspoon, but the minuscule proportion is about the same. A tiny little bit of yeast helps make 100 loaves of bread. In addition to that, you can’t see it happening, hidden as it is inside the dough ball — but that doesn’t mean there’s not a lot going on!

Maybe some of you saw the excellent movie *Hidden Figures*, which was nominated for Best Picture of the Year. Here's how a National Public Radio movie review explained the title of the movie about "The 'Hidden Figures' Who Crunched the Numbers in the Space Race" — "*Hidden Figures* has a triple-meaning title. It is about the mathematics that served as a rationale and a backstop for manned space capsules launched into space and brought back safely to earth. It is about the African-American women who carried out these vital functions in Langley, VA, without the public acknowledgment granted astronauts like Alan Shepard or John Glenn, or even the buzz cut white men at Mission Central. And it is about these human 'colored computers' literally being hidden from view, tucked away in a segregated building on NASA's campus, a fluorescent-lit purgatory from which there was no path to deliverance."¹

At the time, many Americans could probably name the original seven Mercury astronauts: John Glenn, Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, Gordon Cooper, Wally Schirra, Scott Carpenter, and Deke Slayton. I doubt many Americans at the time, or in all the years since, knew who Katherine Johnson (a lifelong Presbyterian and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom), Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson were. Yet, these "hidden figures," a mathematician, a NASA supervisor, and a NASA engineer, hard at work out of sight helped make big things happen. Katherine Johnson's former pastor, Dr. Brian Blount, who is now president of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, said he was her pastor for three years before he found out about her pioneering and crucial work at NASA. He called her "a true space heroine, but one of the people you rarely hear about."²

And then there is the little mustard seed. Some critics try to make a point by noting that the mustard seed is not, as Jesus said, "the smallest of all the seeds" (which is actually the seed of a tropical rainforest orchid, at 1/300 inch long and weighing 1/35,000,000 of an ounce!). But is that really the point? Jesus was probably using an image familiar to the people around him. Compared to a mustard bush that can grow up to 8 feet tall and have shoots as thick and firm as a small tree, the mustard seed **is** pretty small. And yet, from that small seed grows a bush large enough for the birds of the air to nest in.

I was fascinated to learn that a 13th century Jewish rabbi named Nachmanides described the creation of our world and the entire universe with the image of a mustard seed. Commenting on the opening verses of Genesis 1, the rabbi talked about all of the raw material necessary for creation being contained in a speck the size of a grain of mustard. He wrote, ". . . in the beginning, G-D, who is the creator of all forces, created the heavens and the earth. This means that He created these things from absolute nothingness. The thing that was created was a small object that was as small as a seed of mustard, this was the heavens and everything in it. There was also another small dot that was created and this contained the earth and all that is contained in it. This is the primordial matter for the heavens and the primordial matter for the earth."²

It's almost irresistible to hear Jesus describing the small beginnings turning into wonderfully large results when he describes the kingdom of heaven with a mustard seed and a pinch of yeast. When you think about how the gospel spread through the

witness of Jesus' original followers, it is astounding. Jesus promised his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) And so they were — and here we are today, 2000 years later. From small beginnings come astonishing results!

But there is more to these short parables than just big results from small beginnings. According to Mark's gospel, the very first words Jesus says in his public ministry are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) Notice that in his his parables about the kingdom of heaven, Jesus doesn't say, "The kingdom of heaven **will be** like a small mustard seed or a pinch of yeast." The kingdom of heaven is not some far off in the future event or place that we might hope to live in one day. No, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is breaking into your lives right here, right now. It might seem small, you might not even see it, but be assured, God is actively at work in this world, just like the 375,000,000 yeast cells or the tiny seed that slowly grows into an 8-foot shrub as large as a tree.

Nancy and I have a niece named Georgia who lives in New York City. She is a composer, music director, and performer. She is married to a three-time Tony Award winner composer and performer. Georgia moved to NYC twenty years ago to begin her career. During those years, she has taught classes, written music, worked with performers, played and conducted in the music pit on Broadway. I remember Georgia telling me, "When you watch an awards show and the presenter says something about the 'overnight sensation,' just remember that that 'overnight sensation' has probably been doing the same things I've been all these years. There's a lot of work that nobody ever knows about." Then she laughed about somebody being an "overnight sensation" at the age of 40!

Jesus' parables about the mustard seed and the yeast bring us a word of hope. Many times it's not easy to see the evidence of God at work in our lives or in the world around us. If we're completely honest with ourselves and with God, sometimes it's hard to see God at work because we don't take the time to look around and see all the ways God is at work. Also, we live in a world in which events seem to argue against God being at work.

To that Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is near . . . and it is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large tree . . . it is like a pinch of yeast that helps half a bushel of flour become 100 loaves of delicious bread." In other words, God is at work in our lives and in the world, even when it appears so small (like a mustard seed) or even hidden from sight (like a pinch of yeast).

Many people comment on the tagline I include in my emails: "Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?" It comes from the thoughts of Eugene Peterson in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*. Peterson writes about how God always takes the initiative, always and everywhere, and says it is "the conviction that God has been working diligently, redemptively, and strategically before I appeared on the scene, before I was aware there was something here for me to do. . . the conviction that everything we do is a response to God's first work, his initiating act. We learn

to be attentive to the divine action already in process so that the previously unheard word of God is heard, the previously unattended act of God is noticed.”³

The tiny mustard seed and the pinch of yeast bring us the promise of great things to come, because of God’s initiative in our lives and in our world. The tiny mustard seed and the pinch of yeast also remind us that God is always and already at work, even in places and situations where we can’t see that work going on. Just as the tiny mustard seed invades the entire garden plot with an 8-foot tall shrub and the pinch of yeast infiltrates the entire batch of dough and transforms it into a light, airy, and delicious crust, so the kingdom of heaven is at work in your life and mine.

The American Christian writer, Philip Yancey, has said, “Faith is not simply a private matter, or something we practice once a week at church. Rather, it should have a contagious effect on the broader world. Jesus used these images to illustrate His kingdom: a sprinkle of yeast causing the whole loaf to rise, a pinch of salt preserving a slab of meat, the smallest seed in the garden growing into a great tree in which birds of the air come to nest.”⁴

When I was growing up, I used to enjoy singing Hymn #500 in the old red Presbyterian hymnbook, “God Is Working His Purpose Out.” I liked it mostly for its majestic music. I thought about that hymn in relation to the mustard seed and the yeast: “God is working His purpose out As year succeeds to year. God is working His purpose out, And the time is drawing near; Nearer and nearer draws the time, The time that shall surely be, When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God As the waters cover the sea.” When I looked at the hymn lyrics, I discovered that the final verse very much relates to the message of the mustard seed and the yeast: “All we can do is nothing worth Unless God blesses the deed. Vainly we hope for the harvestide Till God gives life to the seed; Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, The time that surely be, When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God As the waters cover the sea.”

Arthur Campbell Ainger wrote that hymn in 1894. Our closing hymn today is much more contemporary, written by Natalie Sleeth one hundred years later. The message is the same as the parables of Jesus. As you look at your life and the world and wonder, “Where is God already at work in this situation?” think about these words:

*In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there’s a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*⁵

Let us pray: Almighty God, creator of the universe, we are awed by your wondrous works that we see all around us. Help us to trust that you are just as much at work in power and love in places hidden to us. We praise you for your greatness and your faithfulness. We rejoice that you do not

forget us, that you want to know us, that came to care for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Scott Tobias, “The ‘Hidden Figures’ Who Crunched the Numbers in the Space Race,” December 22, 2016 at www.npr.org.

²December 2, 1015, “PC(USA) member and NASA mathematician receives Presidential Medal of Freedom,” at www.pcusa.org.

³“The Ramban Explains Creation,” Wednesday, July 8, 2009 at www.markset565.blogspot.com.

⁴Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 60-61.

⁵Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace: Whatever Happened to the Good News?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014).

⁶Hymn #250, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower (Hymn of Promise),” *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).