Jim's Sermon – July 30, 2023

Jesus never actually said the words less is more, but that is in fact the message that he proclaims over and over in the Gospels; the shepherd who goes off to look for one lost sheep, leaving 99 behind to fend for themselves; Jesus sitting in the temple watching the wealthy members file in and dump large amounts of cash into the collection basket. When a poor widow drops two cents in the plate he turns to the disciples and says, "This woman has put in more than all the others." "If you want to become great", he tells his disciples, "You must become the least." "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek", and on it goes. When it comes to size, quantities, importance, Jesus turns the logic of the world upside down.

When I read the Gospel for this Sunday what struck me about it was not the power of faith. What stood out for me is the contrast between the smallest things that Jesus could think of and the largest. I don't have a mustard seed with me, but I understand they are sometimes less than 2 millimeters in diameter. A measure of yeast is very small compared to the flour that it will cause to rise. The pearl that the merchant gave up everything for, is not valued for its size but for its beauty and rarity.

Jesus didn't say the more faith you have the more you can do, but rather that the smallest amount of faith is adequate. Faith is about quality not quantity.

In our North American culture bigger is better. If a small house is good a larger house is better, if a small car is good a bigger car is better. If a church congregation of 50 is good a church of a 500 is better. A large amount of faith will have great results. This is the

truth that we all seem to share; and yet, this kind of thinking simply cannot be found in the Bible. It was not the greatest warrior of the Israelites who was able to defeat the Goliath of the Philistines, but the most insignificant of shepherd boys. God chooses not a great nation to be God's chosen people, but a little rag tag tribe of desert nomads.

We see many instances in the Gospel of Jesus stopping to speak to the crowds of thousands who often followed him. And when he finished speaking to them what would he usually say to his disciples? Usually he would, say "get me out of here". He didn't seem to enjoy large crowds. What he always yearned for was to be alone or with his small group of 12 friends.

Less is more. But less of what and more of what? Less self importance, less ego, less pontificating, less power, less drama, less certainty, less of us, leads to *more* of the important things, more clarity in our lives and in our relationships, more effectiveness as God's instruments in the world. More freedom and more love. The church spent 2000 years accumulating more, more riches, more power, more followers. How has that worked?

In one place Jesus says, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains. The equation simply doesn't work when we apply the logic of our culture to it, and yet the message of Jesus is undeniable.

We are called not to be more, be but to be less. To reorder our priorities. Not to seek to fill ourselves with more, but to empty ourselves of what we have. It is counter-intuitive, counter-cultural. But here is some of the very best news of the Good News--that all

that God requires of us is to let go of our notion that we must do it all, to be everything, and simply to be present to one another in our smallness, our vulnerability and our weakness; to know that all of our activity as a church has one ultimate purpose, to grow as a community of believers, loving and supporting one another in little ways.

The garage sale we had was a wonderful example of the importance of recognizing the little things. After all the work of organizing was done, it became clear that what was most important was the way in which the wider community was welcomed into our church hall. The little connections, the small conversations that the volunteers made time for was what made the event a success. Although it is also nice that we made more than we had budgeted for.

But bluntly put, Jesus is suggesting that the smaller amount of our ourselves we put into the situations and circumstances of life, the more possibility there is for God to accomplish great things.

So, if I am reading the Gospels correctly, and I believe I am, how do we become small in order that much might be accomplished? Mother Teresa is an icon of a Christian who accomplished great things. What is her advice? She says "Do small things with great love, ordinary things with extraordinary love." It is not the quantity of our activities, but the quality of our hearts that will change the world, that will grow the church in the important ways, the ways that God calls us to be church, that is, a transparent community that allows the light of Christ to shine in the world. It is this change of perspective that will free us from the tyranny of feeling the need for more.

Some might say what I am suggesting is a cop out, I believe it is rather a buying in, a buying in to the truth of Jesus that to enter into the kingdom of God we must become as children, that we must become small enough to fit through the eye of a needle, that what God wants is not activity in itself, not the things that we do that make us feel important or effective or worthwhile, what God wants is our hearts. And in return God wants to fill us, our whole being, with the light of divine love.

I have had a few eye exams recently, and at one I saw a picture of my optic disc, the portal at the back of the eye through which light enters our brain. I was amazed to discover how small it was; 2 millimeters or so, about the size of a mustard seed. I was also amazed to discover that that miniscule optic disc has over a million nerve fibers connecting the eye to the brain. The opening that allows us to see and appreciate all the beauty and wonder of the world is tiny.

Jesus says "Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light."

The adventure of faith begins when we stop imposing ourselves, *our* notions of what needs to be done, and simply open our eyes, our minds and our hearts to the divine. And the smallest opening is enough. The light of faith doesn't need much room through which to shine, a couple of millimeters will do.

The Good news of today's Gospel is that we are not required to accomplish great acts of faith to live as people of faith. St. Francis de Sales is quoted as saying: "While I am busy with little things, I am not required to do greater things".

It is not *great* faith that moves the world, it is whatever faith we happen to have. Our little portion of faith, the little things, the emptiness and openness to God's gifts of grace, are not only enough to get us by, but in their smallness, are the very things that will in the end change everything.