

“Seeing Greater Things”
a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “PERSPECTIVE REBORN”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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Mark 4:26-34 NRSV

²⁶He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Are you the proverbial “glass half-empty” or “glass half-full” type? Are you able to look at a situation and see the potential or see the pitfalls? I read an article this week in which the writer said he had attended a workshop designed for people who do consultations with organizations to help them maximize their potential. He said the leader of the workshop asked the attendees to complete the sentence, “The thing that is wrong with most organizations is...”

Then he said, “The answer you give to this is what you will be looking for before you even begin to work with a group. That is your perpetual screen. If you are not careful you will simply spend your time looking for evidence to justify

the conclusion that you have already reached about most organizations.”¹ I believe what he is saying is that very often we get a certain perspective on life and we carry that into every situation. That can be good, or it might not be helpful. Sometimes, we may need to have our perspective reborn.

The challenge of changing perspective can be overwhelming. If your life experiences and personal observations have taught you one thing, going against that, seeing things differently is truly a matter of almost impossible proportions. If you’ve always been a Republican how could you ever see things the way a Democrat does? If

¹ Hugh L. Eichelberger, “A New Perspective,” Day1.org, June 23, 1996.

you have always thought people were bad and intend you harm how could you ever believe someone who seems to be trying to do something for you means anything but harm? If you have always thought security was based on what you had in the bank or who you were married to how would you ever see it in different terms? These are just a few of the ways our perspective is defined.

When Jesus talks about a mustard seed becoming a tree shrub large enough for birds to nest in he is talking about reality. But if you looked at the mustard seed and weren't able to see greater things you would never imagine it could become a tree. The human eye can only see what is, and then the mind must interpret what it sees. The human imagination, the seat of faith, may see what is not, what has never been, what some say never can be. I want to suggest to you that Scripture witnesses to three facts in relation to this that can help us if our perspective needs to be reborn.

First, Scripture witnesses to the fact that God sees greater things in all of us. Let me argue this first in a general sense and then in a more specific sense. The witness of Scripture is that God loves us. No matter what else we may derive from Scripture I don't think anyone here would deny that Scripture testifies to God's unending, inexplicable, overwhelmingly passionate love for us. I believe God sees greater things for all of us because of God's great love for us. But more than that, God sees greater things for us because God knows our capacity, God knows what God created us to be and our place in creation.

The Psalmist asks, "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet." [Psalm 8]. God has given us great responsibility because God sees great potential. God knows we don't, any of us, fully realize that potential. But God sees it.

Hugh Eichelberger says, "One of the things that characterized the ministry of Jesus was His ability to see beyond the appearance to the possibility. He viewed others, not so much in terms of what they were, but in terms of what they would become as a result of the liberating power of God's love. An ordinary fisherman became the rock on which the church would be built. A dishonest tax collector becomes a trusted friend and disciple. Outsiders are invited to be leaders. The unclean are restored to fellowship. The hopelessly ill are made well again. An angry Pharisee who is a persecutor of the church becomes the apostle to the gentiles."² Christ embodied that vision of God that saw the innate value in each person.

The second thing that I think this tells us is that God calls us to see greater things in others, too. If Christ could see beyond the limitations of those first disciples, if he was willing to call you and me his brothers and sisters, then we should be willing to see greater things in others.

² Ibid.

Most of us have heard the adage that if you treat a dog as a good dog or a bad dog it will live up to that name. This is often used as a reminder that humans are much the same way. But God calls us to see the possibility in others, the potential for living up to the greatness of God's love for them.

Hugh Eichelberger went on to say this about how this should change our perspective on others. "Not only are we likely to find what we are looking for in organizations, but we are also likely to find what we are looking for in life. If I believe that people are 'no darn good', I can find ample evidence for that. If I believe that nobody should be trusted, I can find lots of data to justify that position.

"And it is true, some people are 'no darn good.' There are people in the world who cannot be trusted. But if you believe that this is all there is, then that perspective becomes a prison that limits your energy and restrains your enthusiasm for the future. It is a perspective that leads to cynicism, bitterness and depression. It is a perspective that cuts the nerve of energy and joy in your life and keeps you from achieving your God--given potential." I would add it will also cause you to be an impediment to others.

"Jesus lived His life with a perspective that was markedly different from most of the folk with whom He came in contact. The thrust of His gospel was an invitation to view self, others and the world in the light of God's love,

power and justice."³ I believe that is the key to seeing others, and indeed to seeing the world from a different perspective. It is the ability to see the world in light of God's "love, power, and justice."

As people of faith we are called to believe in God's love, power, and justice. We are called to make a commitment to that perspective of the world, and to believe that the ultimate destiny of creation is to fulfill God's love, power, and justice. When we see that God is at work moving toward the fulfillment of his purpose in our world then we do not have to fear the people who are "no darn good." We don't have to fear their success or their victory. They may have their day. They may have their time in the sun, but God's love, power, and justice will not be overwhelmed. The message of the cross is this above all else, the power of injustice and sin and death cannot overcome our God. Resurrection is God's absolute promise that his love, power, and justice will overcome.

So that leads the third perspective change that I think we need to hold onto. God calls us to see greater things in ourselves. In one of the epistles of John he says, "See what love the Father has for us that we should be called 'children of God.'" I think this is the greatest thing we can say about someone, and the greatest way to perceive them differently.

You and I have been called to be children of God. So have all the "great unwashed" of the world. We are, as the old preachers used to say, children of

³ *ibid.*

royalty, sons and daughters of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We have been adopted in and destined for greatness. There are way too many people who have not recognized their destiny, have not seen themselves as God sees them, do not know that God loves them this much. If you and I want to do a great thing, we can begin with this small thing. We can begin to remind people and help people recognize their identity in God's eyes.

I'm not saying that doing something great for God means we have to get elected to higher office, go to Africa as a missionary, or even cure cancer. But maybe we can plant some mustard seeds. Maybe we can do something so small it is almost unseen, that will grow – we know not how – into something so large it gives rest and security to the birds of the air. And we know what Jesus said about those birds. He said, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" [Matt. 6:26]. And if we are so valuable to the King of the Universe, shouldn't we be able to do small things in God's name? That same King of the Universe has promised that like the mustard seed it would grow into something far greater than we might ever have imagined.

Some have said Jesus told this parable because there were some who were critiquing him and his movement for being so small and insignificant. He had roamed around Palestine talking to his followers and at his peak he had

maybe several thousand who would turn out to hear him. But mostly it was just a dozen or less. So it must have seemed that his efforts were as inconsequential as a mustard seed. Well, we know now that that mustard seed of love, power, and justice outlasted every empire and government and force that existed then or since. The Roman Empire, the dynasties of China, the Third Reich, the Soviet Empire have come and gone and the mustard seed that Christ planted still continues to produce greater things.

Those of us who have heard the call to follow this Risen Christ ought not to feel inconsequential and ineffective. We participate in mustard seed things. We plant seeds and they grow, we know not how, but they grow and multiply by the love, power, and justice of God and become great things. God's hand is too great to be turned away by sin, injustice, hatred and death.

So I say, whether your glass is half empty or half-full, let us be about small things, mustard seed planting. Let us do small things and trust the love, power, and justice of God to make them into greater things. Let's just be sure that the small things we do are just as filled with the love, power, and justice of God as any big things we, or anyone else might do. AMEN.