



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



**Bibs or Aprons?
Rev. Lori Lewis
September 23, 2007**

This past Tuesday, I was sitting in a classroom at Floyd Central High School helping to proctor the ISTEP - the Indiana standardized tests that were being given. I was reading some things in preparation for my sermon. Some of these students looked like they were going to fall asleep and I wondered how each of them was doing on the test. I was kind of looking around at each one wondering what kind of a student is he, what kind of a student is she, when the words of the parable that I had already chosen for this morning kind of came to life. Jesus was talking about the mustard seed being small and insignificant looking but growing into a large mustard bush or tree and the yeast that is a little tiny part of the bread compared to all of the flour, but yet it is what brings the bread to life by rising it bigger and fuller. The way that this came to life was this. I'm looking at this room full of teenagers - many kind of sleepy looking, many kind of dressed alike, a couple of them I know, most of them I don't know and it occurs to me the greatness that could come from just this room. What if one of these kids grows up to discover a cure for a disease, what if one of these kids invents something that changes our lives, some of these kids might grow up to be great parents - I start thinking things like that and I feel this great feeling of hope. God does make great things out of ordinary small things like a mustard seed, like yeast, like teenagers in our little piece of the world here in Southern Indiana.

In the Old Testament when God is making promises to the people of Israel, the language is about greatness and so God talks about the people becoming like a great big noble cedar tree. Jesus was great about getting us to think about things in other ways - not to negate what was said to Israel, but to add to it in a kind of comical way by suggesting that a mustard seed could have an image of grandeur too. The cedars did not even grow in Israel, they had to be brought from Lebanon. But mustard bushes or trees could grow up in anyone's field. God's rule doesn't have to appear in the grandiose; a mustard bush will do just as well. And the parable of the leaven makes the same point. Jews who eat no yeast during the week of Passover, recognize its importance better than most Christians who don't eat bread without the yeast in it - even flat bread which is so popular and which I really like, - it has yeast in it too. Yeast is definitely one of those ingredients that when you look at it, seems unimportant, but you can't have bread as we know it, without it.

First, in the parables, we need to look at what Jesus was saying about God. The great thing about Jesus parables is that he wanted people to understand about God so they are not that hard to figure out. It's clear in these two parables that God values all and that small and insignificant can be made great with God's touch. And that leads us to looking at what the parable means for us

today.

The message of the parable is different than what our society tells us most of the time. If you asked most people who has risen to greatness in our society, the chances of someone saying a rich person or celebrity are far greater than someone suggesting Rosa Parks and yet small Rosa Parks, an unknown black woman changed history for the better because of a small but mighty act when she sat in the front of the bus.

I've talked a lot in sermons about the underground railroad and it is because I think we are so blessed to have the history in our very own community and everytime I hear stories of the underground railroad I am so so inspired by the seemingly small acts that saved lives and that together began to change the heart and mind of a slave holding nation. If anyone doubts the presence of God or the goodness that humanity is capable of, they need only hear the stories of the underground railroad.

When I was a child we visited the Redwood Forests in California and I remember it well - especially the part when we drove through a cut out in one of the tree trunks because they are that large.

Those redwoods came from a single acorn and many of them are 2000 years old. It's hard to imagine something so small growing into something so magnificent 2000 years later, but that is exactly what happened with Jesus too. One single man traveling by foot and by donkey to preach God's word, buried in death and 2000 years later, the effects of his life are massive. Who could have guessed 2000 years ago that a single acorn would turn into a great Redwood and who could have guessed that Jesus crucified, dead and buried would turn into a resurrection that would change the world and would still be giving life to Christianity some 2000 years later.

There is a story that has been sent to me by several people on the internet so you may have seen it. It is one that is worth telling.

A mother tells this story.

Some days I am only a pair of hands, nothing more: Can you fix this? Can you tie this? Can you open this? Some days I'm not a pair of hands; I'm not even a human being. I'm a clock to ask, "What time is it?" I'm a satellite guide to answer, "What number is the DisneyChannel?" I'm a cab to pick up, "in front of school at 5:30, please."

I was certain that mine were the hands that once held books and the eyes that studied biology and the mind that graduated summa cum laude - but now they have all disappeared into the peanut butter, never to be seen again.

She's going, she's going, she's gone!

One night, a group of us were having dinner, celebrating the return of a friend from England. Janice had just gotten back from a fabulous trip, and she was going on and on about the hotel she

stayed in. I was sitting there, looking around at the others all put together so well. It was hard not to compare and feel sorry for myself as I looked down at my quickly thrown on jeans and a blouse; it was the only thing I could find that was clean. My unwashed hair was pulled up in a banana clip and I was afraid I could actually smell peanut butter in it. I was feeling pretty pathetic, when Janice turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, "I brought you this."

It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I wasn't exactly sure why she'd given it to me until I read her inscription: "To Charlotte, with admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees."

In the days ahead I would read discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work: No one can say who built the great cathedrals - we have no record of their names; these builders gave their whole lives for a work they would never see finished; they made great sacrifices and expected no credit; and the passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.

A legendary story in the book told of a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, "Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof? No one will ever see it."

And the workman replied, "Because God sees."

I closed the book, feeling the missing piece fall into place. It was almost as if I heard God whispering to me, "I see you, Charlotte. I see the sacrifices you make every day, even when no one around you does. No act of kindness you've done, no sequin you've sewn on, no cupcake you've baked, is too small for me to notice and smile over. You are building a great cathedral, but you can't see right now what it will become.

I keep the right perspective when I see myself as a great builder. As one of the people who show up at a job that they will never see finished, to work on something that their name will never be on.

When we recognize greatness that God is bringing out of the small and insignificant seeming things, it is because God is still speaking to us and through us. That's true about raising children and lots of other things as well.

The hope in all of this is pretty obvious on a personal scale - we are all capable of greatness - greatness as defined by our faith, greatness because God's hands are upon us. But our church too is capable of greatness.

We have lost a lot of members in the last couple of years and there are churches growing quickly in our community. I know it frustrates all of us at times that we are not growing like that. But remember the mustard seed and with faith in God, let us believe that we are capable of much greatness - maybe not in numbers as the society often suggests is the measuring stick - maybe our

greatness will be in service that touches lives that is not measureable. Maybe our greatness will be in the incredible welcome that we extend to everyone to be a part of Christ's church. Maybe our greatness will be the influence we had as a faith family on a single child. I can't imagine that God cares how many people we have in worship as much as God cares about what we do when we're together in Christ's name.

Our minister of music, Laura McDonald sent me a wonderful article from the United Methodist bishop here in Indiana.

Of course he visits a lot of churches, and at one of them he was given an apron and they told him that every new member was given an apron (we don't have them for our new members today but it's a great idea and here is why.)

That congregation has focused upon giving persons an apron (appropriately labeled with their congregation's name and motto) as a symbol of our call to service as Christian disciples. In particular, their senior pastor said that they are trying to combat the usual consumer attitude of choosing a church "to feed me."

Bishop Coyner said that he likes his new apron, and he especially likes the reminder that we don't go to church just to be fed (that would mean we all wear bibs to church), but we go to church to learn how to feed and serve others (hence the apron). Certainly all of us have times when need to be fed, nourished, supported by prayer, and cared for. Church must be a place where all of us receive God's grace when we need it. But if we stop there - only asking, "What's in it for me?" - then we buy into the consumer mentality of our culture, and we make church into just another place where we shop for our favorite treatment and service.

So, how about your church? Are you giving people bibs or aprons?

We are all mustard seeds, small dots on this planet of ours and our church is like yeast, a tiny part of all the Christian churches around the world, but God has told us that greatness is possible for us because of God. May we constantly redefine together what it means to be great and may we together listen to God who speaks to us and guides us to be agents of grace and love as we serve God together. May we be great!