



THE EBENEZER MESSENGER

Monthly newsletter of the Ebenezer Moravian Church

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December 2011

A Little Lump of Grace

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

-Luke 13:10-21

While teaching in a synagogue, Jesus spies a hunched-over woman in the back row, huddled off to herself. He calls to her to come forward, and awkwardly, self-consciously, she shuffles her way to the front. When Jesus removes the burden she has been carrying around for the past 18 years, a rush of youthful feelings comes over her. She straightens up and sets the stiff, dry atmosphere of the synagogue ablaze. But the synagogue leader is quick to pour water on her impassioned praise to keep it from spreading out of control.

When Jesus lashes out at the hypocritical leader, the rejoicing woman sits down and the crowd becomes suddenly subdued. Jesus seizes that tense moment of silence to search his mind for an illustration about the kingdom of God. He overlooks images from government, military, and civic life. Instead, with the casual ease of a child gathering wildflowers, he picks an image from the people's own backyards - the image of a man planting a mustard seed in his garden.

The mustard seed was one of the most common herbs in the Middle East, used not only in seasoning but in everyday speech. The phrase "as small as a mustard seed" was a proverbial one. Jesus used it when he said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move." But in spite of its small seeds, the mustard plant could grow so large that a horse and a rider could gallop under its branches.

The point of the parable is that the kingdom of God could come from small and seemingly inconsequential beginnings. Jesus could have used the image of a towering pine tree or a spreading oak. Certainly that would have been a more fitting symbol for the stately grandeur of God's kingdom. But the pine cone and the acorn are not small enough seeds for the purposes of his illustration, for his emphasis are not so much on the future greatness of the kingdom as it is on its present insignificance.

That's what the people in the synagogue were seeing that day. They were seeing a mustard seed planted in the soil of that woman's heart. For 18 years she had come and gone, Sabbath after Sabbath,

and found a little inconspicuous place in the back to sit down. No one in the leadership of the synagogue paid her any attention. She was not a big donor. She was not a person on their list to be groomed for any kind of public ministry. She was just a bent-over woman...little more than a mustard seed in the grand scheme of things.

Jesus looks over the synagogue and catches the eye of that woman, sitting erect now, her face moist with tears of joy, and another image comes to his mind to illustrate God's kingdom. "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." With the back of her hand she wipes away the tears. She knows the illustration is for her. It is Jesus' way of saying that her world matters, too, and that it is brimming with parables of its own.

"The kingdom of God is within you," Jesus once said. It starts with a little lump of grace hidden within us. And slowly, silently, it permeates our life, lifts it, transforms it. It worked that way for a tax collector in the temple courtyard. And for a prostitute on the street corner. And for this bent-over woman in the synagogue.

Oddly, Jesus addresses none of the pressing issues that plagued the first century. The government was godless, yet he led no revolt to overthrow it. The populace was heavily taxed, yet he led no rally for economic reform. Many of the people were slaves, yet he led no movement to liberate them. Poverty. Classism. Racism. The list of social ills was as long as it was ugly.

Instead of making that list his political agenda, Jesus was content to plant the tiniest of seeds in the unlikeliest soil, to hide a lump of grace in the life of a nobody. A fisherman. A tax collector. A centurion. Heart by heart, that's the way the Kingdom of God grew. Quietly reaching for the sun. Spreading throughout history so people from every tribe and nation could one day roost in its branches.

A Mary. A Martha. An old woman with a bent-over back. Expanding, imperceptibly, like a loaf of rising dough...and filling the world with the aroma of freshly baked bread.

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus, teach us:

*Not to despise small beginnings. For it was in Bethlehem, the least among the cities of Judah, that you chose to start your life on earth.

*The meaning of little things. For a mere cup of water has eternal significance when given in your name.

*The value of little things. For it is by being faithful in little things on this earth that we will be given responsibility for greater things in your kingdom.

*The far-reaching effects of little things. For a simple request by a crucified thief ended up changing his destiny for all eternity.

*The power of the little things. For how silently the mustard seed grows, yet how pervasive is its influence; how invisibly the yeast works, yet how transforming is its power. Amen.

-From Moments with the Savior by Ken Gire

Advent & Christmas Blessings to each and every one of you. May you experience the humble, powerful love & grace of the tiny babe that is born in Bethlehem, and may that love & grace grown in you and through you to be shared with all those you meet.

Pastor Jane