

SURPRISING POTENTIAL

Rev. Terry Jay Thompson

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(Second Sunday after Pentecost)



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Lectionary Texts:

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20 or Psalm 72; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17;
Mark 4:26-34

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13

³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

¹⁶The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

²Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me."

And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you."

⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?"

⁵He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice."

And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. ⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD."

⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."

⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."

¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these."

¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?"

And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep."

And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."

¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."

¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Mark 4:26-34

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.

In today's texts we find that, with God's help, people and seeds have surprising potential. From the texts of Samuel and Mark we find God using human vehicles for God's purposes. First, Samuel. What a job God gave him! He was told by God to anoint a new king over Israel, before the old one had relinquished his throne. That can get a prophet killed!

Samuel was to go to the house of Jesse to find God's candidate. Jesse and Samuel assumed that God would be looking for the strongest or eldest son for the

job. But, God said “no” to all of those and held out for the youngest, the lowly, harp-playing shepherd, David. Because, as we learn: “God looks not on outward appearance but, into the heart.”

And after Samuel’s anointing, David would go on with surprising potential ...to be the greatest and most influential king in Israel’s history. We too often find ourselves looking only at outward appearances.

In the early eighties, I attended a trendy workshop for counselors and pastors to help us lose our sex role stereotypes. The basic premise was that men and women often objectify one another through these stereotypes. We were asked to participate in a series of “reverse role play” experiments. I’ll never forget them. The men were asked to walk a runway with the women making all sorts of comments about our outward appearance. Comments that need not be repeated from this pulpit. It was humiliating! The women were asked to sit in several rows of chairs in order of their personal income....income separate from spouse or inheritance. First row \$100,000 up; Second row \$75 to \$100 thousand; Third row \$50-\$75 thousand and so forth. Then we were to ask the women questions to determine whom we might choose to date. Well, it was a clever effective idea...and equally humiliating, I’m sure. The women in the first row received all of the attention.

And although we’ve perhaps moved beyond some of these trite stereotypes, does anyone really question that we still often make judgments of people based on outward appearance? So, we often find ourselves surprised by the persons God chooses to call...or to lead.

How can we guard against such superficiality? We can try to suspend our first impressions of others to build in-depth relationships with people until we can learn what’s in their hearts where God resides.

Consider a list of unlikely persons: stuttering Moses; fisherman Peter; thorn-in-the-side Paul, great persecutor of the church; or more contemporary surprises, Eleanor Roosevelt; Helen Keller; or a community organizer with mixed-race parents. Who among us today...unlikely in appearance, may God be calling to some form of ministry or leadership?

Or: unlikely a candidate as you may think you are, to what is God calling you?

Oh, I've heard all of your excuses: "Oh, I don't play the piano well enough to play for Sunday school." "I'm uncomfortable visiting in hospitals." "I'm not good with older people." "I have no carpentry skills to help on the mission team." "I taught Sunday school when my kids were small, so let the parents of young children teach." Or, "You must have to be a professional singer to sing in the St. Paul's Choir."

I would suggest that it's a selfish sin to withhold sharing one's God given talents with the community of faith, or the community at large. For, in the end...it's not really about us....it's about what God can do through us. Our only work is to become the most faithful vehicles we can become for God's work in the world. How? Through the basic spiritual work of de-cluttering our lives; quiet time for listening and study; emptying prayer.

Let's turn to the Gospel text. In this scripture we find one of the most familiar of Jesus' parables....the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus' ingenious tool...with layer upon layer of meaning to be unpacked in every age. This series of Kingdom parables is used not only to describe some future afterlife reward, but a vibrant and present kingdom which can provide meaning for our daily lives. The mustard seed: Do you remember the mustard seed necklaces and bracelets? My sister had one with that tiny, dead-looking seed encased in plastic. The obvious meaning points to the spiritual fact that great things can come from small, seemingly unpromising, beginnings. From this tiny seed could sprout a huge shrub...large enough for birds to roost...a kingdom offering life and protection for us as well. Remember, the first hearers of this parable were receiving hope and comfort during a time of great persecution. And for us, to remember that small efforts can produce mighty results, in good times and bad.

When I came to St. Paul's in 1980, Houston was moving into difficult economic times. There was a steady stream of persons coming to our doors for all kinds of help...usually food or cash. This was before we had the Emergency Aid Coalition to help. One lay person who was deeply concerned about these people was Norma

Pitman, of blessed memory. She was so frustrated by our lack of interest in helping that she started making sandwiches at home and bringing them to the church to hand out at our Fannin Street door.

Norma was just that kind of St. Paul's saint, who saw a need. While we clergy were holding needs assessment meetings with leaders of other congregations to decide how best to respond, Norma was just busy "DOING IT." For you see, Norma lived out the truth of today's parable: plant the seed and then turn it over to God. Surely at the time, Norma, or any of us, could have ever envisioned a fully staffed Abraham Station, 15-congregation outreach facility, serving some 300 persons a day...clothing, food, groceries, school supplies and love....and spinning off from this, S.E.A.R.C.H., one of the most creative homeless day shelters in the nation. Yes, I think we "get it" that little things, with God's help, can grow into something great and wonderful.

However, as a pastoral counselor, I've learned that a small bad thing, a tiny mistake, a small sin, not turned over to God with a prayer of forgiveness, can become something large and very destructive over time. I once received an online request through our web site from an anonymous woman who was dying of cancer. She said she wanted to get to know a potential "funeralizing" minister before she died. She had lost her voice through chemotherapy and wanted to just chat by e mail. I quickly agreed. Over the next few months, I received several notes a week from her, pouring out her life story. History, family, ups and downs. Each epistle delving deeper and deeper into her heart. My only job was to listen and make brief affirming responses.

Although most of her life had been blessed with good people who loved her and a reasonably comfortable existence, it was obvious that there was something she wanted to share that was difficult. Finally, after many months of correspondence, she agreed for me to come to her home for a visit. An adult daughter would be there to help me understand her words. After some brief pleasantries, she leaned forward and whispered that she needed to talk about something which had bothered her for her whole life. As a child of age 6 or 7, she told me that she had shoplifted a candy

bar from a drug store. She had not been caught, but she wondered now if she would still be able to go to Heaven.

We talked about God's forgiving love. I told her of John Wesley's concept of prevenient grace...that God's forgiveness would be there anticipating and waiting for her with love and forgiveness even before she could complete the prayer request. That little negative seed, watered by fear and guilt, had grown into a spirit-choking-vine for over 60 years.

What an incredible privilege it was for me on that occasion, to take her hands in mine....to act as a vehicle for God's loving forgiveness, and to bear witness to God's miraculous healing which would enable this tortured woman to die a few weeks later, in peace.

Now back to the parable. Now who does the work in the garden in today's parable? Our work is to plant the seed. God's work is to create the miracle of growth. Then, we can get out the sickle for the harvest. Although we have little to do with the growth process, which is God's work, we can participate by cultivating and watering. But, if you're like me, you can kill a plant by over or under watering it. It's a delicate balancing act as we work with God in the process. A word of caution: this is not a parable about human achievement. It is about divine/human collaboration.

I have a really fine heart doctor, Dr. Neal Kleiman, with the Methodist Debakey group. We meet now just once a year as a follow-up to some heart procedures he performed for me four years ago. We've developed a good working relationship. When Dr. Kleiman enters the examining room, he wheels his stool over beside my chair...almost shoulder to shoulder. As we talk, we look out into the room together as he listens to my health concerns. He treats me like the most valuable source of information for my own health plan. It feels like we're partners in keeping me healthy. He never hurries our visits. He asks if I have any questions and then listens and waits to see. After I ask all the questions on my list, there is more silence and then he asks, "Any more?" All this happens before he even starts the physical exam.

Don't you suppose that's the kind of relationship God wants with each of us?

Come into God's presence. Plant the seed. Trust that God will take care of the growth process, wanting only for us to water and nurture appropriately. Getting our lives in sync with God's...in a balancing act. So that, shoulder to shoulder with God, we can watch something wonderful grow before our eyes. And then God will anoint us as kingdom builders....vehicles for God's healing action in the world.