

## The Advent and the Parables – 7. The Power of the Small

1. Let's start by looking at a short parable that is included in three Gospels. [Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19]
2. Each are beautiful, and each has its own spin on the story. These are not contradictions as Jesus would have told this story several times in several different places to different groups of people. We can merge them together and get a fuller picture of what Jesus was trying to say.
3. One of the aspects of Advent that has always fascinated and, at times, puzzled me is how God chose to invade the earth. He was always here, of course, and always involved, caring, loving and active...but the way He chose to bring His Kingdom to the planet was through the body of a very young girl who wasn't quite married. He sent a baby. I just never get over that.
4. Why start that way? Why start by having angels tell shepherds when shepherds were often viewed as the bottom layer of polite society, unable to give testimony in court for they were not a people of status. Why, then, not wait until after Joseph and Mary were married and then tell Joseph to stay away from intimate relations with Mary until after the birth of a son who would come from heaven? I know, I know, there are theological answers to these questions but the fact that there ARE questions means something: this isn't the way we would have handled things.
5. Instead, God started very small. Mary, then Elizabeth, then John, then Jesus, then some friends Jesus gathered...a few years later, thousands are baptized after Peter's sermon in Acts 2.
6. So, let's read that again: [Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19] Is it possible that one small seed can, one day, cover the world and give shelter to all who come to it? Well...yes, it is certainly within the realms of possibility. Let's look at some facts.
7. Globally, the Pew Research Center says that there are 2.19 billion Christians as of 2011. That is three times as many Christians as there were in 1910, but still below the rate of growth of the general population. But I don't want to start with 2.19 billion. I want to start

smaller. When I was a boy and young adult, we were told repeatedly that WE were the one true church. If someone left us and went to a different church, they were lost and we treated them that way. I don't believe that now, but I want to play with that smaller number.

8. While I was told that we had over 2 million members, that turned out to be a bad number. Flavil Yeakley and others did tremendous work at trying to find out how many people in the USA were members of a mainstream Church of Christ. He came up with just over a million. Let's start with that (with caveats all around that we are just playing with numbers and we wanted to go small).
9. The United Nations estimates that there are now 7.7 billion people on this planet. Compared to that huge number, a million members of a church seems way too small to make a difference. We'd never have the resources to convert the world to Jesus. Yet...what if every member of our tribe brought one person to faith in a year? And then...what if they all brought one person to faith in a year? And again.
10. Do the math. You would go from 1 million to more than the population of the planet (8,192,000,000) in 13yrs, just by one person bringing one person. Now, this is a fantasy, of course. Not every Christian is going to engage in loving people into Christ every year...
11. A word needs to be said here: we do not befriend others and love them fiercely, caring for them, sharing with them, and inviting them into our lives so that we can sneak up on them with Jesus! That would be dishonest. We love people until they ask us why and then we tell them why. More people are interested in Jesus and how you show him than you might suspect...if, of course, you live Jesus and show Jesus.
12. The Pew Research Center says there are 2.19 billion Christians on earth...but we don't know how many of those are truly Christian and it is not for us to make those sort of judgements...but, remember, this all start very, very small with Mary, Elizabeth, John, Jesus, the 12, the 3000, etc. all the way to you. Don't let it stop with you.

13. We do not bring people to Jesus so that our congregation will grow. We bring them because God loves them and Jesus loves them. And we love them. We want to offer to them the shelter of the tree Jesus references in this parable. And, right after the parable of the mustard seed, he uses this illustration: [Matthew 13:33]
14. I've been in churches where the baking of bread was a community effort. People babysat starters and shared bits of them with each other. It was heaven...and it illustrated heavenly truth: being small doesn't mean that we are without power, not with God enters the story.
15. [Matthew 18:34-35] One of those ancient, heavenly truths is found here: [Mark 26-29] Jesus is lord of the harvest. Our job is not to be concerned about how and why and when. Our job is to be faithful, to show Jesus through our love, through our generosity, kindness and grace. Jesus promises us that He will take it from there.