

"THE WORTH OF SMALL THINGS"

TEXT: He told them another parable. "The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, 'till it was leavened". (Matthew 13: 33)

INTRODUCTION It really isn't necessary to argue the worth, the power of small things to people who live, as we do, under the shadow of the atom. Even though we are told and try to believe that the atom is the great blessing for which we pray, we dare not forget for a single moment the threat it contains. Too small to be seen by the naked eye, it is not too small to be known - to be respected - to be feared. Indeed, as no other generation before us, we are or ought to be well acquainted with the power and the worth of small things.

JESUS - ACQUAINTED WITH IT Yet, we are not the first ones to discover the value of small things. Jesus of Nazareth knew and believed in the power of small things. His parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (both of which were read earlier in the service) suggest this to us.

One parable tells of the swift growth of the mustard tree from the smallest of seeds to a tree of great height and luxuriant foliage. The other parable tells of the way that leaven permeates the meal used in the baking of bread. Both parables dealt with things that every listener to our Lord was familiar with. The mustard tree flourished in all of the valleys of Palestine. It was alive with birds feeding on its seeds...perhaps within easy view of those who listened to Jesus on this occasion. And bread was baked daily and leaven was needed for it, except on special feast days when unleavened bread was required by law.

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA I should like to think that Jesus as a child crowded around his mother on baking day. I should like to think that he observed everything that went on in the kitchen with careful eyes and with a mind that took in the meaning of it all. And perhaps on the occasion of some large family gathering, he saw Mary prepare an unusually large amount of food. She took three measures of wheat - close to a quarter of a bushel - put a little leaven in it and it leavened the entire loaf.

How richly our Lord was to use this experience from his early days later on in his teaching ministry when he wanted to tell his followers about the Kingdom of God, and of their role in its growth, and of what it would mean to them and to all men.

He saw in the leaven which his mother thrust into the kneading trough filled with wheat or barley the kingdom of God being thrust into the world by God through him and his disciples. Few though they were in number and unimportant in influence or power, yet through them the entire family of mankind was to be molded and shaped by the power of the kingdom of God.

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form large ones. (2) time is required for the transformation. (3) someone must do it, and must know what he is doing and believe in it completely.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE... I think that most of us have learned never to underestimate the power, the worth, the value and significance of small things, at least in some areas of life.

I'm always reminded of the truth of this parable each time we have the pleasure of entertaining in our home. To my masculine eye, the apartment is all in readiness a day or two before the event - but mind you not to the eye of the one who is in charge of final decorations! She will say there are a "few little things that have to be done".....and then the apartment will be ready. I've always been interested in those "few little things". Decorations in several places - flowers here and there - accents just right - candy in a bowl on the coffee table. And when they are all done, I must confess they add up to a quality of unity and beauty in appearance that dresses the entire apartment. We know how it is, too, when the wife has to have a new outfit. If all that was involved was a new dress, it wouldn't be so bad. But the little things - the things the wife calls "accessories" (and I've learned that these can add up) the new hat, the new handbag to match, the new shoes, the new gloves...

Earlier in the service we baptized several infants and again we were reminded of the joy and happiness that a little baby can bring into the lives of people - parents and grand-parents. And we're reminded again of how a little baby can bring a change into the lives of people....a change in their living habits, their schedules. If we had lived in the year 1809, we would have said that the great event of that year centered around Napoleon and his defeat of the Austrian army. Everybody, everywhere, knew about it. However, present day historians will tell us that that was not the most important event of that year. In that year a child was born in Hardin County, Kentucky, the son of a wandering, illiterate laborer. The birth of Lincoln was the decisive, earth-shaking event of the year 1809.

Mrs. Jerome Schack, President of the League of Women Voters, reminded us last Sunday night of the great importance of your vote. As she put it, "your vote added to the vote of another person, added to others votes piles up and can make a difference in an election". Never underestimate the importance and the power of your vote.

WHAT CAN ONE MAN DO? Surrounded as we are by gigantic events and the tremendous institutions of modern society, each one of us is tempted to throw in the sponge, crying, "What can one man do in all of this?" This is not necessarily the cry of the chronic quitter. It is the honest question of an earnest person who wonders whether he can really hope to get something done with his own life.

And the answer to that question: "What can one man do?" needs to be phrased carefully: "Not as much as he wishes, but much more than he thinks". Instances of this abound in every field.

What could one man do to arrest the slow decay in morals throughout England in the 18th century? No one knew until John

Wesley inserted himself and his dynamic faith deep within the life of that country. Then for nearly fifty years that powerful leaven worked. And when Wesley died, other men were following his example all over the Western World until a mighty force had been set in motion. It is reassuring to hear a historian say that the Wesleyan revival saved England a French Revolution.

Jane Addams comes to mind. She had great dreams for her fabled Hull House. She saw it as a center of human relations that would transform that area of Chicago and perhaps remove the problems of slum areas. She fought steadily through a long lifetime for the achievement of these and other goals. When she died, they were still dreams. Or were they? Yes, in a sense they were because the slums are still with us, only worse. Crime rates are still high. But Jane Addams got more down than she saw or could see with her own eyes.

You could put it this way: the conscience of the city of Chicago is now alert to the problem which Jane Addams saw, and is supporting her work in a hundred different ways. She blazed a trail and indicated a direction that others have followed in other cities. What did she get done? Not as much as she wished, but more than she thought. How did she do it? By being a bit of good leaven in the vast lump of a great city. By losing her life in it and by encouraging others to do the same. It took more time than was given her to see her leaven work its perfect work, but time is on God's side in such matters and men of faith will be content that this is so. ~~This parable of leaven helps us to understand many great things that have happened in the life of our own nation, and our own city.~~

One of the candidates in the Senate Race from New York State was interviewed recently on television. Apparently he was addressing a group of students for one of them asked the candidate this question: "What, sir, was the greatest lesson you learned from your experiences in the national government in the past three and a half years?" The candidate from Massachusetts paused and then said this: "If there is one lesson I have learned in the last three and a half years, it is the difference that one person can make".

It is hard to stop citing cases of what one man can do when he inserts himself and his dream into the lump of his day, ~~with the far-reaching results we ourselves see now.~~ But I cannot stop without calling to witness the foremost example of all - even Jesus of Nazareth himself.

EXAMPLE OF CHRIST What could one man hope to do in the face of things as they were in the first century? Rome, regnant and ruthless; Judiasm subjugated but seething with revolt; religion all but stifled by formalism and superstition. What could one man do? Let me read this statement to you. You've it heard before, but we need to hear it over again.

What can one man do? It depends upon several things: the man; the truth of what he wants to do; the completeness with which he loses himself in the achievement of it. Spectators need not apply for honors in this sort of effort. Only those who give themselves - not of themselves (mind you there's a difference), but themselves - and all that they have will believe in the power of small things enough to succeed.

THE CHURCH

We in the church need to have another look at the meaning of this parable of the leaven if we are to measure up to the meaning of our discipleship today. Do you ever get the feeling, as I do, that God is trying to thrust us deep within the world today in order that we might be his leaven in the lump? This was brought home to me this past week as I saw a man of God of our own time awarded the Nobel Peace prize for 1964.

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Then my cynical streak takes over and tells me that if we are supposed to be the leaven, so to speak, in all of this then something has gone wrong with it - either it's dead, or gone sour. But we cannot give up on the church - can we? If we do, either we give up on everything she stands for or we try to start a new church. And there is neither time nor need for that.

A new reformation is taking place within the Christian Church. Forces working for the renewal and rejuvenation of the church are readily seen by anyone who will honestly study what is happening in the church today. Changes are occurring that give us hope, ~~changes that before long are going to shake up some comfortable so-called~~ Christian people in this land. Everywhere there is an alert awareness of the utter seriousness of these days. Everywhere there is a profound conviction that the Christian gospel has the saving word for mankind. Everywhere there is agreement that that word is LOVE. We have the word LOVE to thrust within the world of hate, division and war. Everywhere there is a growing realization that that saving word can be spoken only in and through the life of the church. Everywhere there is acceptance of the simple fact that the Church must lose herself in the life of this day if she would speak that word in an effective way. She must be willing to be thrust by God as his leaven deep within the mass of problems and dangers and conflicts of our time in order to speak his word from within.

Arnold Toynbee has written an unusually optimistic forecast for us. "The 20th century" he says, "will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an age of political conflicts or technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective."

C. P. Snow has said, "The danger is we have been brought up to think as though we had all the time in the world. We have every little time....so little that I dare not guess it".

Let us hope and pray that Toynbee's prophetic word will come true. I would like to believe that the 20th century will be remembered as the age in which the members of the Christian church took seriously their heritage of love and thrust it so deep within the life and thought of all nations and peoples that it brought into being a saving unity of compassion and community. Should this prove to be true, what begins as the age of the atom will be transformed into the age of love.

PRAYER: Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great book in which we find thy word, knowing that in it thou wilt somehow speak to us and to our condition. Amen

On Friday of this past week, the world was shaken by the news that another nation had joined the nuclear club.

I wonder what they will say about the year 1964? Will they say that was the year Khrushchev fell from power. Or will they say it was the year that one of the infants baptized in this service was born?

Never underestimate the importance of your vote. Your one vote may not look like much in terms of 30 million votes, but there have been elections where a small number of votes have made the difference.

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office.

He never owned a home. He never set foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He had no credentials but himself.

He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of his divine manhood. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves.

His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying. And that was his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of progress. I am far within the mark when I say - that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life!

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