Potomac Hills
Presbyterian Church, PCA

By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

"Growth of the Kingdom" November 3, 2013
Matthew 13:31-35 Rev. Dave Dorst

Introduction:
We haven't told a lot of people yet, in fact I just got it approved by the elders recently, but I am putting together a "Church History" Sunday School class for Adults and College students in the Spring. I'll be calling it: Heroes, Heretics and Holy Wars. Tom's Heidelberg class will be over, so this will be an option along with the class on 1 & 2 Kings. I will take the first 5 months of 2014 to lay out a quick overview of the major trends and figures of church history from Pentecost to Pope Francis' election this past year.

Since I've been studying church history so much, it's been in my thoughts and I was thinking of it as I was preparing this sermon. I want to give you some stories from both Biblical and Church History, listen carefully to see if you can identify the thread that unites them, the common element that runs through all of them:

1) The Jewish nation started with one man, Abraham. It grew when his grandson, Jacob, had 12 sons who became the 12 tribes. Those tribes spread out throughout Israel and multiplied and created a powerful nation under David and Solomon.
2) Think of the spread of Christianity into new areas- the apostle Thomas took the Gospel to India, the apostle Philip took it to North Africa, 4 centuries later Patrick took the gospel to Ireland, in the 9th century Cyril and Methodius went to Bulgaria and converted King Boris and influenced the entire culture for Christ. Nations with very little Christian influence heard and accepted the gospel by the influence of a key person or a small team.
3) This past Thursday we celebrated Reformation Day, the day that Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Church at Wittenberg. The beginning of the Reformation was a bit

more complicated than that (as you will find out if you attend the Church History Sunday School class)- men like John Wycliffe in England and John Hus in Bohemia had been sounding the bell for reforming the church for a long time. But essentially from very small beginnings of men in different countries questioning the abuses of the church, the Protestant Reformation exploded into history; now there are apparently over 30,000 Protestant denominations!

4) In the 1730's a man named William Tennant wanted his 4 sons and other young men to get a theological education, so he started the "Log College," that held classes in a log cabin in Pennsylvania. It grew and eventually moved to New Jersey where it became Princeton University, which despite it's liberal modern incarnation, served the church by turning out some of the finest theological minds and church leaders of the 19th century.
5) More recently, a young man named Rick felt called to start a church in Southern California in the 1980s. So he went door-to-door talking to people about their lives and God and gathered a small group. Today Saddleback Church has over 20,000 people in it, the 10th largest church in America and that young man, Rick Warren, has huge influence, not to mention huge book sales.
6) Much closer to home: 22 years ago a few families had a longing for a Reformed church that preached the gospel in Loudoun County, so they started meeting for prayer and Bible Study. They called a first pastor, became a particularized church, lost the pastor, lost a lot of people, called a new pastor, started growing, called a 2nd pastor, continued growing, called 2 more pastors; here we are 22 years later with @300 people and a half million dollar budget! As Phoebe Rist commented in the Video testimony that's on the website: "we're now a growing, vivacious PCA church!"

Have you figured out the common thread yet? Do you see what connects these stories and the pattern of how God has worked throughout history? Things start small and they grow. God takes something tiny, someone's idea, someone's work, someone's small group or organization, and through the years grows it until it becomes a large work. Occasionally God starts large and doesn't bother with the many years of growth and nurturing, but I'd say the more likely pattern of the kingdom is starting small and the power of the Gospel and the Spirit blossoming something into a large work.

And Jesus told us that's what we could expect. Today's passage gives us Jesus' understanding of this trend:

Matthew 13:31-35
31 *He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.* ***32*** *It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*
33 *He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*
34 *All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.* ***35*** *This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:*
"I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."
("The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.")

We're in the middle of a bunch of parables about the kingdom. I don't know about you, but I think if it were me, I would use big metaphors for the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a

huge mountain, or an overpowering army, or the mighty powerful and deep ocean. But instead we get these funny comparisons to very ordinary things.

We keep getting these sowing seeds analogies. This is the 3rd one in Matthew 13, after the parables of the sower with the 4 soils and the wheat and weeds. There's also the possibility of confusing this parable about a mustard seed with a later saying in Matthew 17:20 where Jesus says if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed you can move a mountain. And the parable with the yeast can be easily confused with Jesus' warning against the yeast of the Pharisees.

So keep the parables straight. This passage gives us a lot to reflect on, a lot to count on in Jesus' description of the ways that the kingdom works. The first thing we see is…

I. The Promise Of Growth
vv. 31-32- **31** He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. **32** It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

The mustard seed, while not technically the "smallest" seed is a very small seed that grows into a bush that is usually 4 feet tall, but could easily reach 8-10 ft, even 15 feet at its tallest. Large enough for the birds to come and make a home. There may be an allusion to a passage in Ezekiel and the birds might be the Gentiles, but I think the point is that it starts small and it grows really big.

Maybe you're like me and you often feel that you aren't growing fast enough. How many times do you think that your spiritual growth is too slow, that you're not much of a "model Christian," whatever that is?
Do you look at this church or the Christian community in our area, or even the American church as a whole, and think, "Why isn't this bigger? Why isn't God working in a bigger way?"
"How come there are so few Christians in my school? In my workplace? In my neighborhood?"

Let's look at a few things that this parable implies:
1) **Gradual growth is the norm**. The important thing is not how big you are when you start, it's whether you're planted and rooted well. Colossians 2:6,7 says, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness*." When your roots are in Christ, you live in Him and are gradually strengthened.

2) **Progress is gradual because it is difficult**; we have a strong enemy who hates kingdom growth. Paul doesn't say "fight the good fight" for nothing. It's a struggle, growth is hard. Yet God promises that "*He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*." (1 John 4:4b)

3) **Victory is inevitable**. The full growth is assured from the moment the seed is sown, despite what it initially looks like, despite the odds against it becoming large, and despite the opposition it may encounter in its development. Philippians 1:6- "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion*."

Let's think about the original context of Jesus' teaching this to His disciple. Why would this have resonated with the disciples?

They've been walking around with Jesus, seeing some amazing stuff and hearing some really wise and powerful things, but you know they had to be thinking, "When is this thing going to really take off?" "When do we stop walking around and really start taking charge and building something that will compete with the other religions, and challenge Rome?" There was a natural impatience to see God's kingdom in all its glory and the victory over all that opposed it. But that was not the way of Jesus, and we wanted them to know that they should expect slow, gradual growth.

So the first parable is about growth, the second one gives us

II. The Promise Of Change

v. 33 - **33** He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

3 measures= 50 pounds, which is enough bread for 100 people! Yeast is often used negatively in Scripture, but not here. To observe that "a little yeast leavens the loaf" was the equivalent of saying "one bad apple spoils the barrel." But not here: Leavening= transforming & growing.

Jesus' point is that the kingdom will grow through an unseen, internal, spiritual dynamic. The change is hidden from sight, it happens inside of people.

1) God works unseen but expansively inside each one of us, His followers. You are not given full Christian maturity when you first come to faith in Christ. It starts small; you still fall into old habits but gradually the Spirit and the gospel expand and completely change you.

2) The gospel works in cultures, spreading and expanding as faithful believers tell the truth about God, redemption, and good and evil. As the Gospel takes hold and the Christian worldview is advanced, families are changed, marriages are strengthened, neighborhoods are safer, companies function more ethically… the yeast works its way through the whole batch.

What drives media and news today? Trying to see who and what are influencing things. A good news story identifies a person who is doing something that affects a great number of people; or a trend that looks like a different way we live. We publish "end of the year" or "end of the decade" lists trying to figure out who had the biggest influence and changed the world the most, who was the "Person of the Year."

Very, very occasionally the media will include a Rick Warren or Billy Graham on those lists, or identify a Christian trend as important- such as when "new Calvinism" was identified as one of the most important recent trends. But for the most part, God works unseen in the world. His amazing hand of providence is constantly working and changing things, but even believers have a hard time identifying the ways that He's working, much less unbelievers who can always attribute His work to something else. But that's OK, because Jesus reminded us that the kingdom works quietly and unobtrusively, just like the yeast that worked through the dough. But when we will someday understand all that is hidden and underneath, we will see God's activity and the influence of the kingdom in this world.

Following these two parables, Matthew connects Jesus' teaching style and content with an Old Testament citation to show us

III. Revealed Wisdom

vv. 34-35 - **34** All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. **35** This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in

parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Verse 35 is a quote, actually closer to a paraphrase of early verses in Psalm 78. And we could look up Psalm 78 and read it through, it's a great Psalm about God delivering Israel despite their continual disobedience. But I think the main thing that we need to know from Matthew citing this reference here is this: Jesus isn't just some Garrison Keillor or some other storyteller who tells cute, folksy stories. This isn't your Uncle Joe sitting around telling you stories from when he was a boy. This is the Messiah giving you the most important truths that you need to know. These stories contain revelation that God had kept hidden from the beginning of the world until then. These are strong doctrinal truths, but they're packaged in an easy-to-hear, candy coating. It's not like reading a systematic theology textbook. After all my years of seminary and reading theology textbooks, I still love the books that start each chapter off with a story. They draw you in with a story before they hit you with the propositional truth.

Conclusion:

There is so much to chew on here.
God's Kingdom in human experience has been, and always will be, small to start with.

The biggest thing I'd like to remind us is **Don't Despise Small**

We want bigger, bolder, louder in so much of our lives, don't we? If it's exciting and big, it must demand our attention and our money. And the church often follows suit- we need to make church bigger and brighter, faster-paced; our conferences and festivals need to compete with the world. We could go a long way critiquing things, couldn't we? But Jesus reminds us that small is a great place to start.

Because, after all…
A) You are Small
Louie Giglio tells the story in his book *I Am Not But I Know I Am* of preparing to meet with a couple big-wig music executives who wanted to partner with him with his Passion worship records. His initial strategy was to present all the great things about his ministry, all the strengths: the wonderful artists that he works with, the successes they'd had, and the unlimited potential in the future. But then he felt that God was telling him that he was small. So he thought, "Amazing strategy! Tomorrow when they show up, I'll go super-low profile. I'll go in acting all small, and just when their defenses are down, wham! – I'll jump up and surprise them with our strength!" But then he felt the Lord saying essentially, "No, I'm not saying that you should act small. I'm saying that you are small." And when the truth of that sank in, he felt released from so much pressure to impress these guys.[1]

In contrast: I recently saw a sign for a church that I hadn't heard of, so I looked up their website and was surprised to see that they had full staff, programs for every age, ministries for managing your money, a full spate of small groups. So I assumed that they had been around for 10 or 20 years. They've been around for less than a year and a half! There's nothing wrong with that. But I wonder if they missed the joy of starting small and growing organically. And it just proves that we're embarrassed to be small. And I feel that- I have friends and relatives at much larger churches and I often feel the unintended slight of "what's wrong with your church that it's so little and still meeting

[1] Louie Giglio, *I Am Not But I Know I Am*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005, pp. 112-115.

in a school?" Of course, we're 3 or 4 times the size of the average American congregation, so it's all relative, isn't it? But even if we are small, perhaps that's God's design for us right now. Don't despise that.

Everyone knows that temptation- to build yourself up and let everyone around you know how important you are, how what you're doing is really wonderful. Even if you're humble about it (takes one to know one!) But the truth is that we're tiny, we're small. In the span of eternity, we are a speck of dust. Nothing. God is accomplishing amazing things throughout the span of eternity, and we are tiny part of that. He will accomplish things around and maybe even through us, but we have to see ourselves as grafted onto the great work that He is doing. When we start with the premise that God needs me to do something great, to get things right so He can start working, we're way off. We're nothings, but that's who God loves.

B) Jesus Made Himself Small

That's the way of the kingdom. That's the way of Jesus. You can't get much more small and humble than to go from being the King of the Universe, the Creator of all there is, to becoming an 8 lb. baby born in a feeding trough in a small town that belongs to a conquered people group. Then spending the first 30 years of your life in obscurity. Then after 3 years of building a ministry and gathering a huge following (despite the fact that you constantly tell people not to spread the news about you and teach really hard things that discourage people and make them walk away), after all that you allow yourself to be captured, tortured & killed. Can't get much smaller than that. Your followers are devastated, they think that all is lost; until they hear the life-changing, earth-shattering good news that you defeated death and are no longer in the grave. And following that resurrection, the Christian church had the message, the plan and the power to spread the Gospel to the whole world. God took the seed of Christ's obedient death and the power of His resurrection and planted the church that has grown to every corner of the world. Jesus made Himself small, but used that to grow the kingdom immeasurably.

C) Obedience Is More Important Than Size

Kevin DeYoung had a wonderful article some time back called "The Glory of Plodding." I highly encourage you to read it, you can find it at Ligonier.org. The main idea is that today it is very excited for young Christians today to talk about being revolutionaries. He cites one writer who said that we need to raise up a million "Bonos" (the lead singer of U2)- people who will launch out and start bold, exciting, big projects that attack the social problems of today like Bono has attacked the global AIDS epidemic. DeYoung writes: "With all due respect (to Bono), what's harder: to be an idolized rock star who travels around the world touting good causes and chiding governments for their lack of foreign aid, or to be a line worker at GM with four kids and a mortgage, who tithes to his church, sings in the choir every week, serves on the school board, and supports a Christian relief agency and a few missionaries from his disposable income?"

"What we need are fewer revolutionaries and a few more plodding visionaries. That's my dream for the church- a multitude of faithful, risk-taking plodders. The best churches are full of gospel-saturated people holding tenaciously to a vision of godly obedience and God's glory, and pursuing that godliness and glory with relentless, often unnoticed, plodding consistency."

"Daily discipleship is not a new revolution each morning or an agent of global transformation every evening; it's a long obedience in the same direction."[2]

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[2] Kevin DeYoung's article "The Glory Of Plodding" found at www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/glory-plodding.

Are you saying that small things I do advance the kingdom? Yes, I think I am.
That reading and talking about the Scriptures with my family advances the kingdom?
That bringing a meal to a grieving family advances the kingdom?
That inviting people into my conversations, into my life, into my home for a meal advances the kingdom?
That praying for someone, or writing a note of encouragement, or saying no to temptation, or any of a hundred other little things can advance the kingdom? Yes and Amen!

Sean Michael Lucas summarizes these two parables: "Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God advances in a highly unlikely manner: through ordinary people, hidden away, not seen, not recognized doing their small, ordinary things. When done in obedience to Jesus and to the glory of God, the church and God's kingdom advances."[3]

[3] Sean Michael Lucas' sermon "Kingdom Parables" found at sermonaudio.com.