

Sunday, July 12th: Rev. Susie Putzke
Matthew 13: 31-35

It's no secret that some of the biggest things in our lives start small.

- **A Trip of a lifetime** starts with a little seed money stashed away over time.
- **A friendship** starts with one conversation.
- **A teenager** starts as a sweet little William or Sylvie (brace yourself friends)!
- **A career or vocation** can be prompted by a single experience.

in nature...

- **A garden** starts with a pile of dirt.
- **An oak tree** begins as an acorn.
- **A bird's nest** is built twig by twig.
- **Prairie restoration** begins with handfuls of seed and years of patient tending.

At the church the same is true...

- **A church ministry** often starts with one person saying, "What if we tried this?"
- **A youth group** forms with a few kids feeling safe enough to come back the next week.
- **A service project** starts with one idea, one volunteer, one small act of care.
- **A persons sense of belonging** might begin with one person learning their name or practicing their pronouns.

As we continue our "*Out to Seed Series*" we are invited to see God at work in the ordinary yet again. Trust me, in time you will miss the metaphors that are accessible to the average person when we find ourselves in the Old Testament a little later in the year. Most of us grasp the concept of a seed and perhaps we have an affinity for the mustard seed as it was used to motivate or reassure us at some point in our lives. The Mustard seed gives Thomas the train energy; "I think I can... I think I can. We were encouraged to just believe a little. To give something a small but mighty chance...to have just a little more faith.

Talk about a leap of faith...I started my "official" appointment as your Pastor in June of 2023. I arrived not as a stranger to this place (*which sure was an advantage*). But came with a comforting awareness of this congregation and who they were becoming. I arrived with a host of ideas and a host of nerves about all that might be asked of me. You all make over a decade in hospital ministry look like a walk in the park... (I'm just kidding...kinda).

Within weeks of my start date, I knew I would be tasked with the creation of a Vacation Bible School like experience. It was clear that as a church you desired programing that would be exciting, intergenerational and that invited engagement with all the amazing things this property

and location have to offer, oh and it was to be inclusive of all people, ages and abilities... oh and should be trauma responsive... No pressure...

Thankfully, I arrived to a staff and a congregation already hard at work with many hopes and ideas and visions for how to use and share our beautiful prairie with the people of this church and hopes for how it wished to serve the greater community.

Just a couple weeks in (*before I had my feet underneath me*) I found myself at a brainstorming session with four individuals who were brave enough, crazy enough, and trusting enough to go on this journey with me. Fun fact, all four of them were brand new to the church (*like less than five months new*). I am not sure if between the five of us we could have located a scissors or glue anywhere in the building, but when we put our heads and hearts together, the ideas were endless.

It became clear that my role would be that of a switchboard operator. Connecting the hopes with talents, ideas & resources. And just weeks later, (with the help of church staff, church leaders and some fabulous volunteer recruits, we hosted our very first ever Intergenerational Eco Camp. And guess what? It was awesome!

The goal of Eco Camp was and continues to be pretty straight forward. Create everyday experiences: hikes, art, conversation, wonder, and community. Bundle education with fun and frivolity. Create experiences for joy and connection.

And for the past four years it has only grown and of course, like many things and people, with time, we have become a little smarter and more savvy with how to pull it all together. Last summer's eco camp was executed using predominately recycled and existing materials to make art, to learn and to explore. We served fabulous meals and again provided a space for church friends to be formed and made some pretty extraordinary memories on our property. I proudly assert that no activity was my idea.

The best progression of our eco experiences is how it continues to evolve from being individual or team led to something that is owned by the entire congregation.... Why? Because little ideas, small contributions added together become so much bigger, so much more imaginative. And when this happens ordinary things become extraordinary and Eco Camp has become a holy time.

The progression of these experiences has been so fun to witness. Small dreams, small visions small seeds (*literally at times*) taking root within the soil and within the hearts and minds of our of all who experience it. Or experience it vicariously through photos and stories.

In the sharing of the small parts of ourselves we continue to grow and contribute to a much bigger picture. By being a part of the larger body we are not asked to do it all, just share a part of ourselves. It takes some pressure off to know the whole of the universe is not being held by one of us alone. Sewing small seeds invites others to all sorts of new roles, knowledge and experiences.

Again... (in my shameless plug for Eco Camp it's quite simple...

Kira loves Birding so she offered to share her knowledge of all of her Bird friends she has met out on the prairie...

Neak... well Neak has skills for days from bubble art to owl culture just to name a few.

Carl was already over the moon for pollinators and prairie flowers so he found new ways to share and teach his passion with the rest of us.

Janet and Jamie are avid kayakers and wanted others to experience that same joy too, so they called their friends.

We've have had artists, story tellers, water balloon throwers, We have had grown ups on waterslides and kids searching for snow geese. We have had people like **Mary, Dale and Jim, and Dianna** and so many others that its dangerous to start naming anyone at all...but if you know or have witnessed even one of these individuals, you know their passion is absolutely contagious.

And that spreading, sharing, growing, breaking open is really the power of the mustard seed parable isn't it. That concept that it only takes a spark to get a fire going. That a tiny seed could grow into a tall shrub that feeds and shelters many.

One Kayaker turns into 17 Kayaks and a pit crew, one persons passion for flowers turns into a class on how to make floral arrangements out of our native prairie plants. One child's idea of celebrating an Arctic Biome turns into Ice Skating in the Ed Wing on a 95 degree day. One goofy adult turns into a whole pile of goofy adults playing with snow, pretending to be beavers and getting their hands dirty.

Like the mustard seed analogy, we can predict and hope that Eco Camp will happen. We can make assumptions that it will be bigger than the sum of its parts and greater than what we imagine.

What we can't predict, and maybe what matters most, is exactly how those moments will settle into a person's heart. We can create space for connection, curiosity, rest, and relationship with the natural world, but we can't map out in advance what someone will feel or carry with them

afterward... But we have much evidence throughout lived experience that small things matter greatly.

Small things are not without risk...

If you are at all like me you might doubt yourself from time to time. You might not run the race, or raise your hand or join the book group.. you might question your offering, your contribution to the whole...your talent, or quantify your faith... but let me tell you. God is here for it! And God is here for you! In whatever ways you show up, in whatever baggage you carried in with you. God is invested in what you have to offer, how you might serve, how you might share of your talents, your interests. How you might teach us through pain, through illness through aging and through play. You hold the key to something amazing and beautiful that the rest of us need, just by being you.

We often think we have to have it all together. That we have to be the biggest piece of the puzzle, have all the answers, that we somehow have to recreate ourselves to establish belonging within a community.

Without stopping to smell the roses or be still and observe, it can be hard to name and share this message of how ordinary people showing up is so transformative. But Jesus does it here and he did it last week and by golly he will do it again. We don't question if the yeast will cause the bread to rise. We assume even the tiniest of seeds has a future. Regardless of the metaphor we are reminded that God is the transforming agent in all of these scenarios.

God is already working in us and among us. God transformed yesterday, God is transforming today and God will continue to transform this church, these people as we work collaboratively to create a kingdom of heaven in the here and now. This beautiful sanctuary does not make the church... our amazing land does not make the church. WE... the collective, we... the imperfect. the broken, the awkward, the insecure. The musician, the dancer, the child, the widow. We the people make manifest the kingdom of heaven. We are like the seed, like the yeast are the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary.

The kingdom of God is not built by swords and might by wealth or perfection. It is built by one small act stacked on one small act. It is built by people sharing what they know, helping when they can and by faith in action.

And friends the church is such a great arena in which to practice the world of kingdom making. A beautiful space in which to share our something small. A place to practice being brave, being heard. A place to be watered, nourished and sheltered. A place to grow. This work and spiritual

practice is not different from how we foster a friendship, how we approach our jobs, how you care for creation and our families. We do so by nurturing all the things little by little. Through hope and prayer and in faith and purpose.

As a church, as the body of Christ, we have and will continue to benefit from each other not as we ought to be but as we are. Our diversity, our quarks, our shortcomings and our gifts and graces make us more real.

Jesus didn't say we are like a mustard seed. That we have to possess it all on our very own. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like this... The kingdom of heaven is in all of us coming together like yeast into bread we rise. Not because we are perfect, not because we have it all figured out, but because we are part of something much much larger than ourselves. We are not alone! Jesus' point is that this kingdom of heaven making business... it works best if we do it together.

All these small things...seeds the size of grains of sand...yeast lost in a lot of flour....So small, so diluted... easy to overlook... but not us. Love First United Methodist church, let us not be overlooked. Let's practice feeding one another. Let's practice watering each other... growing alongside one another helping each other rise. So that the kingdom of heaven can be experienced now, in this time and place. Let's name it when we see it. Let's talk about it. Let's speak in to one another what we see, hear and experience them doing right here, right now.

Our part is subtle but oh so powerful. These everyday, simple acts, encounters and experiences are intended to invite us to see the humility and the power of God. God at work in us, within the hearts of all people. God at work in our minds, our experiences. Jesus uses these small but mighty analogies in contrast to all the systems of power and might and authority that held and continue to hold people down. Let us not be overlooked Love First. Let our power in our inclusion, our diversity, our hospitality and community that we each lean into and pour into.

And let us be brave in the small things, in the small ways that make a big difference to our people, our neighbors, our friends and those who just don't quite get what it is we are doing over here. Let us in the words of mother Theresa, "Do small things in great love!" Amen.

Amen.