

The Mustard Seed Kingdom¹

Tuesday's the big day—midterm elections. Doesn't it feel like these elections are the most important ever? We hear such elevated rhetoric. "America is up for grabs!" "Chart a new direction." I know that all elections get us to thinking about where we want to go as a people. But this election cycle—in the midst of a very sluggish economy, feels particularly consequential.

I tend to be a big picture guy. Several years ago when our congregation was doing the long-range plan and re-arranging our organizational chart, someone used the expression "looking from a 35,000 foot perspective." That means getting way up in the sky to see how the landscape is arranged for miles around. Where do the mountain ranges end? Where does that highway go? It's raining over in Alabama but not here. These are the things you can see from 35,000 feet up. The big trends.

I'm more of a 50,000 foot person. I'll say, "Kids nowadays are completely post-modern. That's why they're the way they are. Regular grown-ups, I'll say have one foot in the modern world and another in the post modern world. We have cognitive dissonance because of it." People hear that and their eyes light up, "tilt!"

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 31, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia. Additional sermons and other materials may be found at www.fpclagrange.org

Hey, I'm a theologian! I'm completely comfortable with the most abstract of abstractions. I'll be sitting in my car wondering why Protestants never were very big into virtue ethics, which almost certainly is connected to our commitment to covenant theology. And the guy in the pick-up truck is honking his horn wondering why I'm not moving 15 seconds after the green arrow has lit.

Several months ago it began to occur to me that my 50,000 foot look at things may be completely, or at least partially, a waste of time. One reason I say this is because it is very difficult actually to make any positive change when it comes to the big picture. How many times have U.S. presidents—we've all heard this—confess that once they got to the Oval Office they realized how stunningly little power a president really has. World events march on. Geo-political shifts occur whether the president likes them or not. The circumstances of the world dictate what the president must respond to. So, if the president isn't really calling the shots as much as we think, how much more am I powerless to re-direct the direction that the world is headed in?

Suppose I work out what the major theological shifts are in our time. Does that change anything? Might there actually be

more of an impact on the world if I go to the hospital and drop in on someone who would love just talk with someone?

The self-help and organizational expert, Steven Covey touches on this in his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. He lines out the world as having three zones: First, he speaks of areas over which we have control. This is our own personal space and the relationships around us. A second zone is the area where we have partial or indirect control. He's thinking of the influence we have over other people's behaviors. We may want them to do something, but they may not do what we wish. Then, thirdly, there are areas over which we have absolutely no control. These would include my 50,000 foot concerns like whether the economy comes back, or whether the country goes back to being something it was in the past, or whether people will catch up with postmodernism or whether the Christian movement continues to decline.

The area I'm interested in today is the first one, the one over which we have real control. I shudder to think how much mental energy I spend and maybe you spend pondering megatrends over which even presidents have no control.

It may seem to you at this point in the sermon that we really haven't said anything important about Christian faith or that we're just chatting about some interesting ideas that are

pretty much a tangent from our relationship with Jesus. But I think not. Especially in Jesus' ministry and teaching, I keep bumping into the idea that our faithfulness starts with our own little worlds—our own household, our own friends and hobbies, even our own thoughts and daily life. When we can bring the reign of God into, say, our relationship with our neighbor and how we keep up our house, and what we read and watch on TV, there's a tendency for that field where God reigns to grow.

The Kingdom of God, so Jesus teaches us, is like a mustard seed. The mustard seed Jesus is talking about is quite tiny as a seed, but it grows into a large shrub where birds can make nests. If we can bring God's will and yearning into the smallest area of life—say the way we treat the waitress at Cracker Barrel—there is something planted that will last and grow.

Jesus is an altogether good illustration of what we're thinking about. Jesus was completely engaged with the immediate world around him. Even large crowds appeared too big to Jesus to work with effectively. Think how often Jesus, confronted with a mob of people, picks out one face in the crowd—Zacchaeus, the woman with the flow of blood, the fishermen whose boat Jesus needed to borrow, the man with the withered hand in the synagogue, or the paralytic lowered through the roof into Jesus'

presence. Jesus came to start a great movement that would influence world history. Yet we have no evidence that he ever thought about or was anxious about the state of his great movement. Jesus just walked around planting mustard seeds. His movement that is alive today is simply the outgrowth of all those tiny acts of kingdom faithfulness.

You may know the name Robert Coles—he's a social psychologist at Harvard. Coles attended Harvard as a student. He was once talking with someone he met who was explaining to him that her mother worked for the university about the time that Robert Coles was a student. At first Robert Coles wondered if the mother was an administrator or faculty. No, the mother's work was with the students in their housing. She served them meals and vacuumed and did student laundry. Robert Coles faintly remembered that the housekeeping staff in the student dorms were simple working women who the students called "biddies." Coles was embarrassed by the conversation, because he knew that he and his classmates paid practically no attention to the biddies. Even if he had seen the mother of the acquaintance, Coles wouldn't have known because he never knew the name of a biddie. They didn't have names. They were simply there to iron the clothes of Harvard students. They were there to wash their dishes. Ironically, what the students were often

studying in their classes had to do with the plight of the poor, and the injuries of class, and a philosophy of disinterested love—agape love. They could write a thesis on love. And the students didn't know the name of the simple lady who ironed their shirts.

I'm wondering if by this lesson about the mustard seed, Jesus is calling you and me to redirect our focus to our own biddies in our lives. Aren't we being called to prize our own time and our own situation as an opportunity for acting faithfully to the kingdom? I'm talking about the situation in your neighborhood where there needs to be a little loving intervention in order to make your street a bit more peaceful and dignified place to live. Instead of worrying about the correct strategy the secretary of state needs to adopt to bring North Korea into the family of nations, worry about how you are going to bring a Kingdom attitude into coaxing your neighbor to a changed attitude. I don't know whether the country is "up for grabs" or needs to be taken back. But I'm not sure it matters, because you nor I have absolutely no influence on that question whatever. But maybe your Sunday school class is up for grabs. Maybe there's something you and your classmates can be studying and talking about together that will have real impact on everyone's relationship with Jesus. And maybe the drama of the

moment is calling that little group to faithfulness. Where would Jesus focus his passion?

Isn't the mustard seed parable saying that the kingdom gets its start in your little but very real world and it grows from there? It's about your home, your co-workers, the people who depend on you, your family, your church, LaGrange. Small and hidden, that's how God works. And, to pull in another comment Jesus made, he or she who is faithful in little will be given much—to be faithful over.