It was a mistake any “rookie” pastor could make: “I am proud of the faithfulness and dedication of your LITTLE group,” he said. The problem was that he said it to the group of women who had, through thick and thin, kept the church’s Clothes Closet and Food Pantry functioning for those in need in their community for nearly 20 years. There were only six of them remaining now, but that “little” group of Christian women had worked together for nearly two decades to provide a remarkable ministry – a remarkable achievement.

“We are not a LITTLE group!” Agnes North said to the newly-ordained pastor with an edge to her voice, indicating she took offense to his use of the word “little.” The pastor apologized and went back to his office vowing to never again use that apparently offensive word “little” anymore – even it if was true.....

We live in a culture in which the word “little” or “small” is synonymous with “insignificant.” For my recent birthday, one of my grandsons gave me a package of Snickers candy bars. No, they weren’t the large bars, rather the ones labeled “fun” size. Other candy bars are labeled “bite” size or “junior”; so apparently we dare not call them “little” or “small” anymore.

When I went to order soft drinks for a take-out meal recently my choices were “Kids” size, “Economy size,” “Large size”, “Extra-large size”, or the “Big Gulp.” If I had dared to order a “small” drink, I feel sure the employee would have wondered what I was talking about, and would have had to go and get the manager because “Small” is not on the register.

It seems that if something is small or little in our day, its size must be euphemized into some word that says something other than ‘small.’ So if I want a small coffee at McDonald’s I have to order a “senior” coffee – thank goodness I’m old enough to have one. I guess in our day we have now come to the point where we always assume ‘bigger is better’, and small means ‘insignificant.’

Jesus says in this Sunday’s parable that the kingdom of heaven – that which he brings near to us – that which he is calling people to join – is an entity that is small – as small as a mustard seed. So what does it mean for Jesus to point out the smallness of the kingdom? True, Jesus says that this tiny seed, when it germinates, becomes a ‘shrub.” Matthew kind of embellishes that a bit by saying a “tree.” But no one has really ever seen a mustard tree; and to tell the truth the mustard seed is not the tiniest of all seeds either.
Yet, the growth of a plant from a small seed into a small shrub is impressive – as is the miracle of any and all growth – but we are so used to things growing, this transition from small seed to small shrub, is just SORT of impressive. Of course, this is a very short, as in ‘small’ parable that Jesus tells.

I wonder why Jesus tells this short, small parable.... Was it because the disciples had become discouraged? We certainly couldn’t blame them.

We are now deep into Matthew’s gospel. Jesus has preached his beautiful ‘sermon on the mount’ outlining his religious views as a kind of systematic theology. He has performed some amazing signs and wonders - miracles. He has spoken beguilingly about the “kingdom of heaven.” His disciples have left everything and have ventured forth to follow him – so far.

And yet, a long way into this journey now, things do not FEEL like an outbreak of the kingdom of heaven. For a time he had managed to attract some pretty impressive crowds. But a careful reading of these later texts seems to reveal that by this point in Matthew the crowds are beginning to dwindle. The miracles and the healings are still impressive, but now Jesus seems to be engaging into even more conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, so perhaps the people are beginning to get leery of this one whose words and ways may bring him to arrest, incarceration, and maybe elimination. Jesus has been pretty direct with some pretty powerful people; calling them a “brood of vipers” is not going to warm their hearts and build friendships. So anyone perceived as being one of his followers is subject to close scrutiny. Besides, how can it be that the ‘kingdom of heaven’ consists of this unimpressive little band of disciples gathered here?

I think it was precisely because of this context that Jesus intentionally chose to tell this short parable about the small mustard seed. When we think about the kingdom of God - that is the work that God is doing to bring the world in line with God’s intentions - we make an erroneous assumption. We make a big mistake by thinking about the kingdom of God by using the same categories gathered from the kingdoms of this world. When we think about kingdoms, we tend to envision large, grandiose powers with massive control over large territories and countless people.

The kingdom of God is the fulfillment of God’s purposes for the world. Notice that most of Jesus’ parables are about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. It is by that means that he patiently teaches us that the kingdom of God is qualitatively different from our kingdoms. Our kingdoms have great impressive palaces, fortresses, big parades, grand victory celebrations, impressive architecture celebrating human achievements. But God’s kingdom is like a seed
growing secretly; or seed thrown on soil where most of the seed fails to take root and germinate, and only a minority flourishes.

Now, in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus teaches us that God’s kingdom is not only qualitatively different from our kingdoms, but quantitatively different as well. As Matthew presents it, the world looked at what Jesus has done thus far and was unimpressed. O, he has healed some people, but not millions of people. He has seen to the feeding of a few thousand on one occasion, but not eliminated hunger for all those who starve daily. He has spoken of the riches of the kingdom of heaven, but has not done one thing to eliminate poverty and instead said, “The poor will always be with us.” He has preached a couple of memorable sermons, but not transformed the world by his speech. He has personally recorded nothing to leave as an historical document (who knows if he can even read or write); what he has said could be captured in a pamphlet, not like the volumes written about rulers of other kingdoms. He has called people to join his movement, but by this point only 12 have stepped forward and continued to travel with him - so far; and frankly, none of them are very impressive.

And yet Jesus tells them not to be discouraged. He tells them not to look at God’s work through the eyes of the world. What the world considers to be small and inconsequential, God sees through the eyes of love, and the lens of eternity. God is doing a mighty work among us, but God’s work will likely not appear mighty in the eyes of the world.

Today, Jesus offers us a parable – a short, small parable. C.H. Dodd offers a classic definition of a parable: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” So it is that parables are well-suited for Jesus’ intentions. They constantly refer the hearer to the real stuff of everyday life in this world. Whatever Jesus is about, he is not about rescuing people from this world and transporting them to some other place above the grubby realities here; rather, Jesus is attempting to lure people in a life in this world in a whole new way. The kingdom of God is not something that floats above reality but is located right here among us, in this world.

And so it is that Jesus seems to be telling us that God works in and through this world through ‘the small stuff’ as an expression of God’s kingdom. When I attended Sunday school as a child, I remember our classroom had a big map of the world that nearly covered one entire wall. Invariably, almost every Sunday, when our teacher Mr. Johnson was making a point about some Bible story, he
would point to that map. He would always locate that little strip of land that is Judea and say to us, “Our Bible story takes place in Israel, in Judea.” Then he would relate the Bible story.

One Sunday, Lee asked our teacher, “All these stories you tell take place in one tiny part of the world at the end of the Mediterranean Sea.” “If these are the only stories we are going to hear and study, how come we have a map of the whole world? According to what we study, nothing important ever happens except in Judea, Judea, Judea.”

Mr. Johnson patiently told the class, “I don’t know why God chose to do so many wonderful things in such a tiny place.” “Goodness knows the people of Judea were not the most impressive culture that was ever created.” “But I do know that God wants all good things that happen in Judea to spread throughout the whole wide world. That’s the way God works.” “What happens in Judea doesn’t stay in tiny Judea, but happens for the whole world.”

In every church I have served, it always seemed as if it took only a few – a few to upset the congregation, or a blessed few to hold things together. Every pastor I know laments that we have only a few people to do all the demanding work for Christ. The magic number is about 20% - 20% of the congregation doing 100% of the work and usually also providing close to 100% of the financial support. We pastors try to enlist others; we constantly strive to activate other believers to join in the tasks of mission, worship, teaching and service. But maybe - according to this parable at least - this is just the way God chooses to work – with a few good seeds.

I’ve got to tell you though, that we are blessed here at Riverside – at least I feel blessed. I would estimate that our support base is at 50% or more - higher than the usual church average. In fact if you will look around here, it is amazing just how much programming, care and outreach this congregation of 300 does in the name of Christ. Could it be that our seed is growing into a shrub?

Sometimes I think about the institutional church and mainline denominations. There was a time when the churches were the biggest, most impressive buildings in town. But not anymore. The biggest and most elaborate buildings in town these days are usually the hospital, or the bank, or the performing arts center, or the sports arena, or the corporate headquarters for some large company. There was a day in North America when a majority of people were Christians, and a majority of those Christians were attending church regularly. But not any more... as I heard the other day, only about 19% of the North American population attend worship services at the mainline denominational churches regularly anymore. True, this is
Sunday in the middle of summer and without our winter population, our attendance always dips in the summer. But look around you .... Does this look like a gathering of a vast spiritual revolution ready to overturn the downward course of the world?

Think for a moment about those of us who gather here. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (I Corinthians 1:26). It’s true ... by the world’s standards, we are not necessarily the “movers and shakers” of this community, state or nation. There are not many of us here who are among the prominent and powerful ones.

But let’s remember the parable of the mustard seed. From this tiny seed there grows a great plan. Now maybe the movement from a tiny seed to a large plant doesn’t seem very impressive to hear. But maybe the parables are a way of getting us to look at things as God looks at them. After all, God’s ways are not our ways; God’s kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world.

Perhaps this is just the way that God chooses to do things. God chooses to answer the world, and to save the world through a Jew – probably a peasant, from a little out-of-the-way place in Judea. God chooses to be present in the world, and to bless the world, through a sometimes foolish, thoroughly human organization called the church. God has chosen, we believe, to bless our little corner of the world though this congregation. Yet apparently from the small, great numbers are to be blessed.

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are given just a sip of juice and a bit of bread. And yet we claim that this holy sacrament is as close as we get to the risen Christ. What, protests the world ... just a small bit of bread; a small sip of juice? This is the highlight of our worship? This is the heart of the sacred mystery that is the Christian faith?

Well, in this faith we are taught to pay attention to that which the world regards as small and inconsequential. In this faith we move from the small toward the great, awesome and majestic purpose of God. For it is appears that this is precisely the way that God chooses to build the kingdom. Amen.