May 30/31, 2015

Small Beginnings and Inconspicuous Places

Matthew13:18-33

Pastor Mark Kremer

Last week we had the awesome privilege to listen to seven different stories of people from Berean that are doing something—doing really amazing things by the power of God out in our community that are truly making a difference! And as I said last week, we literally could have told hundreds of stories. As I just look across the auditorium this morning I know the stories of many of you who are doing something because God has called you to a particular place or a particular group of people, or maybe a particular individual, and you're living out the righteousness and justice of the kingdom of God in a profound way.

So at this point, with hundreds of people actively engaged in the mission and all of these wonderful things happening, do we say, "Hey, that's good—good enough," or do we continue to seek God's face and say, "God, You have put us in this city as a large church. What is it that You want to see happen in Lincoln, Nebraska? And what specifically, God, are You calling the sons and daughters of the kingdom to join You in doing in our community? What, God, do You specifically want us as a church to do to bring a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven here to Lincoln, Nebraska?"

As we anticipate in just a few months our mortgage being paid off on our facilities, both on the global outreach side and here in the community, we are thinking and praying and working towards, "What is it that, God, You want to do when we don't have the constraints of those payments anymore?"

About a year ago I put together a team of about thirteen individuals—a broad, cross representation, not only of our congregation, but of various places out in the community, and we have been thinking and praying and working towards that bigger vision of what God may be calling us to in the future, and we'll be sharing more of that in the months to come. But we have to understand two things: First of all, what is it that God wants to do here? What is God's heart for the city? And secondly, what are the needs and the opportunities? Do we really know even our own city? One of the things I would encourage you to pick up this morning on your way out—it's by all the exit doors—is this paper called the *Vital Signs Report*. It's a community-wide effort to understand Lincoln—its needs, where it's been, where it's going, where are the trends, where are the problems, where are the opportunities, and we have been looking at this. I would encourage you to look at this because sometimes we don't even know our own city very well.

So in trying to answer the question: "What is it that God wants us as His kingdom children to be doing?" I want us to turn to Matthew, Chapter 13, and look at four short parables that I think help give us the answer, at least in part to that question, "What is God wanting to do and what does He want to do through us?" Matthew chapter 13: Now the first of the four parables we are going to look at this morning is one you're very familiar with. It is the parable of the sower and the soils. You have probably heard that parable many, many times. Jesus not only told the parable here in verses 3-9, but then He gave an explanation of what the parable meant beginning in verse 18, and we are going to read the explanation beginning in verse 18 of Matthew 13:

> **"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil *one* comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road." (*NASB, Matt: 13:18-19)**

Now I want to stop for just a second because there are two things that are worthy of note here. First of all, remember he says, "**If anyone hears the word of the kingdom**…" Jesus came to earth announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God and presenting Himself as the King, and so that is the good news of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the redemption and restoration of all things under the rule of Christ, and by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, He is the worthy King—and wherever the King resides, there is the kingdom. So when Christ resides in us, the kingdom of God is in us. It's not fully here, but it is here; it's present; the kingdom has arrived. And so this is good news because the people were looking for this good kingdom where all of the things that were wrong in the world would be righted, and life would be what everyone deeply longs for. So they came announcing the word of the kingdom, and you'll notice that the first type of soil here, maybe they heard it but did not understand it; therefore it didn't bear any fruit. Verse 20:

> **"The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."** (Vs. 20-23)

One of the important things to notice here is that if there's going to be flourishing, that if there is going to be this multiplying effect of real life—fruit being born in life—the gospel is central to flourishing. To receive Jesus as King and Savior is essential for flourishing, and therefore the point of this parable is that the seed needs to be sown everywhere, and that we shouldn't be so concerned about the soil on which it falls. In other words, we shouldn't be so concerned about trying to figure out who's ready to hear it or who's not ready to hear it or whether they're in a right place to receive it. We just need to share it, far and wide, and where today there might be rocky soil and there's somebody who's not at all prepared to respond to the good news of the kingdom, tomorrow it might be fertile soil. We're not in charge. We can't see the hearts of the people. We can't assess the soil, but we have been given a very clear mission, and that's: Sow, sow, sow, sow, and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to not only hear but to understand this good news that Jesus is the Savior and life is found in His kingdom!

That requires both gospel kingdom deeds and kingdom words, and we have to sow both and keep sowing and keep sowing. And if it's on God's heart that everyone would have an opportunity to hear and understand, then it's very important that it matters to us that every person has an opportunity to hear and understand. And it's very easy in Lincoln, Nebraska, to assume that everyone in our community has had an opportunity to hear and understand the good news of Jesus as King and His kingdom and what it's all about, but that would be a false assumption.

I wonder if you just think down the houses on your block. Are you convinced that everyone on your block, on your cul-de-sac knows, hears, and really understands who Jesus is and the life He offers? I can guarantee you there are parts of our city, far from where all the churches are—you

know, you've got "Church Row" on 84th street, all those churches—many of the churches, most are around the peripheral of the city. What about the core of the city? Do you think there are people there who really have never had an opportunity to see the kingdom in action, to hear the good news of Jesus and the life He offers, to understand it from somebody who's close, who's there, and present. You see it's our responsibility to sow the seed in word and deed everywhere, and to not make assumptions that people already know. And what if the most fertile soil—that is the people who are most open and prepared to receive this good news—are people who have not yet heard it? Wouldn't that be a shame? Is it possible there are people in parts of our city who are so hungry for some good news, and we just haven't gotten there to tell them yet? I think that's what God is calling us to do. That's what this parable encourages us to do. The next parable begins in verse 24:

> **Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares** (weeds) **among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the *weeds* became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have *weeds* in it?' And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the *weeds*, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the *weeds* and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."** (Vs. 24-30)

Now there's just a bit of explanation. He explains this parable and we're not going to read the whole explanation, but it begins in verse 37 and we're going to read it because it really helps us understand this particular parable: Now the seed and the soil are different. So verse 37:

> **...The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man...** (Jesus is sowing the seed in this particular parable.) **...and the field is the world; and *as* for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom.** (So now here are you and I being the seed sown by Jesus into the world) **and the tares, (**or the weeds,) **are the sons of the evil *one* and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels.** (Vs. 37-39)

So here we have, again, a very interesting story that illustrates the kingdom and that is that God has planted His people in the world, in the middle of evil, and that's where we need to stay until Jesus comes back again. We can thrive; we can flourish there, planted in the midst of the evil of our world, planted in the midst of unbelieving people. There we can bear fruits and minister and be this redeeming force in our world, and that's where God called us. It's uncomfortable at times isn't it? It's more fun to hang out at church where there are nice people, and only rarely does somebody cut me off on my way to a parking spot in the parking lot. *(laughter)* People generally smile at me; they are very gracious to me. It's not always like that—"You don't know how it is at my work;" "You don't know how it is in my extended family." That's where God called us to be in the midst of the evil—to go out and be present there until the end of the age...for the duration. That's where He called us to go.

That's why we do these things, like find a place to serve out in the community, be actively involved in reaching your friends and your neighbors. That's where God called you to be. But I also want to remind us this morning of where we spend sixty percent of our waking hours, and that is in our vocation, our job. And if you don't see that as part of your calling, as part of the place where you

are representing the kingdom, where you are planted by God to be a kingdom son or daughter, then you're going to miss the biggest chunk of your life. You see, I believe God's called people to every single profession—minus a couple! No, I'm not talking about lawyers; settle down Don. *(laughter)* Every profession is a place of calling, and that's where God has planted you. What would it look like to be sons of the kingdom in a factory, in the hospital, in a law office, in an architecture office, at the university? We need to think deeply about that. We need to have a very good Christian world view; we need to be wise stewards of the positions that we have of leadership within our companies and within our businesses, because that's where God called us, and that's the platform for significant transformation to take place, if we will approach it in a holistic way. It's not what you do *after* work; it's what you do *all day*, including your work.

That is such an important thing to me that three years ago we started a thing called the *Agora Fellowship* which is meant for young professionals under the age of thirty-five who are in some kind of leadership role out in the community, and we embarked with them on a one-year extensive leadership development, biblical world view process, and tonight we will celebrate a group of young professionals who finished this last year. I just want to put their pictures on the screen. We have an architect; we have an engineer; we have a CPA; we have teachers; we have a professor at the university; we have a business leader, and we have a non-profit leader. These are young men and women who have sensed their calling to their place in their profession and want to live *on mission*; and if you'd like to a part of that program next year, you can go on our website and find more information about that. Next parable: verse 31:

> **He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR COME AND NEST IN ITS BRANCHES."** (Vs. 31-32)

Here we have the picture of the mustard seed as the smallest of seeds, but when it's planted, it grows into something magnificent that bears fruit and becomes a place of refuge and security and safety for many. Out of small beginnings, God grows something magnificent and beautiful. We saw that again and again last week. Historically, that is the story of the church. From just a dozen disciples and a few hundred followers, the church has grown world-wide with billions of people. What started as a mustard seed has taken root and is this incredible place of refuge and hope for our world. It's true of our own church. A handful of people gathered to pray fifty some years ago. "God, what would You do? Could You do something in Lincoln to plant a church that would actually reach our community?" And fifty-three years later, this is what God has done and continues to do. Out of a mustard seed God grows big, beautiful things, and that needs to empower us on and encourage every one of us. We may not think we're much, have much to offer, have much talent, but out of small things, empowered by the Spirit of God, beautiful and magnificent things are grown.

I mentioned last week a number of places around our community where people had planted seeds in houses. One of those I mentioned was Brad and Carma Bryan who, twenty years ago went to 25th and U Street and moved in across the street from a drug house, where the police were there almost on a daily basis. And as a young couple they planted themselves there and what God took—that little seed of their presence in the Malone neighborhood—God has grown into what we see as City Impact today. I want you to see this video as an illustration of this mustard seed principle about what City Impact is doing and how transformation is taking place out of a little seed planted twenty years ago.

City Impact Video: *(Children and staff share the story.)*

"If you throw a rock into the water, the rock will make waves throughout the water. City Impact is really a rock. When God touches their life and they come into a relationship with Him and know that He is the Rock, then I know truly there's going to be ripples of their lives and the community is going to be impacted in ways we cannot even imagine."

"We have our Bible club which is an after-school program for elementary-age children." "We do Bible studies. We really get a chance to talk to little kids about Jesus. Every single week we do feed them dinner, and it's very family style. We have an amazing kitchen crew that comes, and they make a home-cooked meal. Coming from a low-income family, you sometimes are fighting for every dollar. They have a journaling time, where they journal about strengths or about assets." "I think focusing on strengths is really important for our young people." "So much of our culture today is built around deficits, geared around identifying what is wrong with people, what is wrong with children, and then trying to fix them. Recent research suggests it is so much more effective to identify how they are wired, what they're good at, and then to build on their strengths."

"God did create them. He didn't create them less than other people, but He created them with all kinds of gifts and talents and abilities, and He made them so special, and made them so perfect, but they didn't know that and they didn't even know that they're loved. They are not less than other people and that there is a purpose for their lives."

"We have our Impact Leadership Academy which is for grades 6-12." "We have created four different leadership pathways or workshops that our students can be involved in. They get to choose which teams they are a part of."

"I'm in the Philanthropy Team and we're redoing and rebuilding a playground and a bike trail." "I'm on the Writing Team and what we're working on, is we're making, like a magazine with like all different types of writing in it, like poetry, short stories." "I'm also a part of the Youth Speaking Team. Most people say they'd rather die than speak in front of people, and so I tried it out and I really, really liked it." "That is what our Leadership Academy is really about—to identify their talents and abilities and to go out in the community and to use those to glorify God."

"Elliott Elementary School is one of our core target neighborhoods where many of the kids in the community come to and this is where our core reading program is—the *Impact Reading Center*. We have adults from all over the community who invest one hour a week. They come down to the school and they sit with a child one on one, and they teach them how to read."

"The boys, they were behind; I think 2 years behind in reading."

"If a student is two or more grade levels behind by the beginning of fourth grade, there is a sixty percent likelihood that they will end up in the criminal justice system."

"And there were volunteers that read with them. Before long, one of our boys became a super reader."

"It helps them see themselves as a reader and once you see yourself as a reader, you want to read. So if teachers and volunteers, administrators, the community can step up and see kids—see the

super hero in each child, and give them what they need to succeed—I mean, look, what will happen? I mean poverty will just be diminished."
"This is the housing project where City Impact began. We began hanging out here in the summer of 1993 with kids every Saturday and Marlena Thornton was one of the kids that we used to hang out with here—her and her family."

"My first memories were with my Bible study teacher, Wendy Bowman. I remember when I was like 6 or 7, she used to take me to different places throughout Lincoln and with her family. When she used to live in that area, I used to go over to her house a lot. She didn't have to take me. She didn't …… well, she didn't have to spend that time with me, but it meant a lot to me that she did."

"You have to be willing to really stick with these kids for a long time because trust takes a long time to build."

"And I'm a teen now and she still texts me to see what I'm doing. If I'm down, she's always there."

"As we look back on our life and I look back on my life, one of the greatest things that has impacted me is the people who have remained in my life and through relationship. That is where true impact happens." (End) (Clapping)

Mark: "I just wanted to bring Brad up this morning. We've been friends for about twelve years, shortly after I came here to be on staff. And, again, this is the principle of the mustard seed and I think we ought to, again, just take a moment to thank Brad and Carma for being willing to be planted by God in the midst of evil to see something beautiful and magnificent grow. Would you join me in thanking them?" (Clapping)

Brad: "Well, Mark, I just thank you as well for coming alongside me and being my friend and joining this effort, and on behalf of Carma, myself, my two girls Macey and Miya, our entire City Impact Board and our staff, and every family that has been involved in City Impact, we in turn want to thank you as a congregation, and as a body for investing in us, for praying for us, and encouraging us along the way. It has not always been easy, but we praise God for the work that He's doing, and we are so excited for the journey that is ahead. And we would like to invite you to come next Sunday and learn a little bit more about that. We will have a class at the 9:00 hour and the 10:45 hour, and you can come learn a little bit more about the future vision. We're so excited to be moving into the new City Impact Center in the next month or so, and seeing what God's going to do to continue to see lives impacted and our community flourish. So, thank you so much for your part." (Clapping)

Mark: You can stop by the City Impact booth and get a card (I think it is in the Loop maybe) about those opportunities to learn about volunteering there. This was, three years ago, one of our strategic partnerships as a church with City Impact and we believe this is one of our most strategic and important partnerships in our community because of their presence in the core of the city where we are not. And so, to that end and because of the growth that is happening with City Impact and the expansion that is happening, Brad and the board of City Impact asked me if I'd be willing to ask the church to free up some of my time to help co-lead with Brad at City Impact over the coming months, and so the church is graciously allowing me to use some of my time and offer that free of charge to City Impact to help bring leadership. So Brad and I are co-executive directors and in the trenches day in and day out to try and build and grow, as by the power of God, something that's really beautiful and it's really something we are all a part of. So thanks again, Brad. Clapping.

There's one last parable that I want us to look at. It's very short. Again it gives us another principle. Verse 33:

> **He spoke another parable to them saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven** (or yeast), **which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."**

Now **leaven** or yeast is a *living organism*. When you buy it in the little packet at the store, it is inactive; it has been dried. As soon as you add the right temperature of water, that organism comes to life. And when that little tiny—proportionate to a lump of dough—yeast is just a tiny, tiny little bit of that something you put in, but because it's alive, it literally works wonders in a lump of dough. It changes the texture; it changes the taste. It makes it larger than it ever would have been. It becomes something completely different, tasty and beautiful.

And here you see the woman working that yeast—really that's a picture of us—the leaven, the yeast of the world, working it (the Word said **hid**, but it really meant *to mix in or knead* into the dough), and so you have this picture of us being deeply embedded and kneaded into whether it's an individual's life or a family's life, or some place where you serve, or into your company, wherever it is that God wants to work you in deeply and be deeply connected in that place. And when we're worked thoroughly in, even though we are small, the living power of God in us transforms that person or place into something beautiful.

God has made us to be that kind of force in the world by His Spirit. And I want to share one last story with us this weekend of a great example of that: What does it mean to be deeply embedded into a person's life or a family's life, and what can God do through an individual or a couple to see deep transformation in bringing about the kingdom of God? Take a look:

Video:

Renee: "Hey, I'm Renee Johnson."

Michael: "Hey, I'm Michael, and we are foster parents."

Renee: "We have three kiddos. We have a senior in high school and a sophomore in high school and we adopted our two-year-old son, Tim. I had a good friend who I grew up with and she mentioned to us, when she was in college, that maybe we should look at foster care. Our kids were little, and we were like, "No, this is not the time for us to do that." But I think that seed was planted in our brain and God did something in our hearts kind of along the journey of raising our kids, and it came back to us."

Michael: "A friend of ours who I was doing a ministry internship with, entered into that world of foster care and we kind of got to see first hand that it wasn't as scary or frightening as maybe we thought it was."

Renee: "So when we had the conversation, which actually started because of Lincoln Berean—they were talking about it and asking the church to engage—and so we were able to (after church) kind of talk with our kids about what that looked like."

Michael: "We went out and we saw somebody that was standing at a booth and it was Beth, who ended up becoming our Cedar's worker. She was connected with a ministry called *Restore* that the church was kind of in the infant stages of putting out, and *Restore* really is a ministry for people that are in this crazy world called foster and adoptive care."

Renee: "We signed up for classes and started to go. Some of my very best friends were sitting in that room, whom I met just because I went to a meeting. I think we were exposed to a world that we had really little knowledge of, in the sense of what the need was in our own community, and that these kids were our neighbors. These were people around us and so we became passionate about that and kept talking about it, and God just met us in each step."

Michael: "It's the responsibility of the church to take care of the orphan and the widow, and the orphan today is a foster kid, and the widow is a single mom. The question that we almost always came back to was, "How do we love well in this situation?" It's really easy to love a baby, because he's a baby, but how do you love a biological parent well? How do you love a social worker well? What does it look like to love a judge well? How do you do everything in this realm to excellence? We first heard about Tim probably two months before he was born. He was still in utero. We got a call about a boy who had been abused. That boy ended up being the older half-brother of our son. The doctors didn't think he was going to make it and they just asked us to come and sit with him and pray."

Renee: "This boy's bio-dad was contacted and he entered into the story. God did a miracle over the course of that weekend, and he made it through. Then Tim was born, and we were called and told that he had been born and that we were going to go to the hospital the next day to pick him up. So he was not even 24 hours old."

Michael: "We fostered him for the next seventeen months and for most of that seventeen months we weren't sure if he would continue to stay with us or if he would go home. We started a communication journal with the biological mother and we kind of had some back and forth, and one of the things that Mom found out was that I was in ministry. She was greatly offended at that and pretty appalled, and it was scary whether or not we would even be able to take Tim to church, or go to church on Sundays, or when she had visits during that time. And then just through, you know, our building a relationship and getting to know her and being open and honest and kind of going back to that question, "How do we love her well in a situation," about thirteen months later, May 5th, Mom relinquished her rights as a parent and said that she would like for us to adopt him, and we officially adopted Tim on July 2nd."

Renee: "And she was so at peace with her decision to let go, and she knew that we were going to allow her to see a window into his life. And as we did just sit down with her for coffee not too long ago, and met her new husband and then got to see her life and just that she loves Jesus is amazing, because here's someone who fought just knowing that we were in ministry, and here she is a sister in Christ. It's amazing! If anything, I think that's what I'm most grateful for is that she knows the Lord. As we look at his face and we know that had we not been faithful in that step, how things could have been very, very different. So I am so grateful that we were brave and took the step, and the next step, and the next step and that God was faithful to meet us there." (End)

Mark: What an awesome story of being deeply worked into the fabric of a family and all of the transformation taking place through one family being willing to be deeply involved. So what does God want for our community? He wants everyone to have an opportunity to see, to hear, and understand the good news of the kingdom. He's planted us to that end out in the world in all kinds of places, right in and amidst all of the mess and the sin and the evil of the world, and that's where He wants us to stay. He wants to use us to make even the small things that we do make something magnificent and beautiful. But we have to be committed to be willing to be deeply embedded and involved in those places.

This same model is exactly what God is doing in India; it's what God is doing all around the world. Men and women of the faith, seeing their own personal calling and engaging deeply in small ways makes a profound and huge difference.

So what is it that God has called you to? If you don't know where that calling is, that's why all of these organizations are represented in the hallway again this morning. Stop and learn about places where you can plug in. Find your calling and get committed, and if you know what that calling is, and I just pray that these stories and the things we have shared over these last two weeks are an encouragement to you to keep going even on the tough days, because God will make something beautiful out of it. You and I were made to thrive and to bring that thriving to our community and to the world. That's something worth living every day for.

If you have a sense of calling, a place where you serve, where you see your work as a part of your calling—you're involved somewhere in the life of someone and you know God has put you there, placed you there, it's where He wants you to be—then I want you to stand right now. Everybody who is serving, has a place of calling, whether it's your work, another friend, the neighborhood, whatever it is, if you have a sense of calling this morning, I want you to stand right now. We are going to have a prayer of dedication, the commissioning of you as you go out to be the sons and daughters of the kingdom in this world.

Father, as we stand here before You, we are ordinary men and women, called by You and planted by You in a sin-sick world. But Your light and life in us truly can shine brightly and bring about transformation of lives. Families, neighborhoods, even entire cities, states, countries, such is the power, the good power of the kingdom of God. So use us, Lord, we pray to do Your will, and may Your kingdom in all of its beauty come, and Your will in all of its perfection be done here in Lincoln, Nebraska, as it is in heaven. Amen.

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