

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr

Grace and Holy Trinity Church

Richmond, Virginia

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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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I went to the University of Richmond for undergraduate school. I loved it, though my first couple of years, there wasn't a lot happening on campus in terms of social activities and fun. That was okay for a while, because my idea of a good time was being in the library studying. Yes, I know...I am odd. Still I was happy when the Student Union organization got going and we had all kinds of events.

One that I remember fondly was making the world's largest submarine sandwich...the idea was to have it all documented and to get in the Guinness Book of World Records. I don't even remember if we made it in the book...but it was quite a site...the ambulatory of the athletic center with tables running all the way around...upon which bread was baked in this mobile oven...so you'd cook a portion of it and then move on until you had this huge, seamless loaf of bread that went all the way around. You get the picture.

There is a fascination with large things, isn't there? The world's tallest building. The world's richest person. Soccer player with the most wins, or the baseball player with the most homeruns. We bask in the glow of those

stories...big numbers mean big success, big accomplishments. Nothing wrong with any of that. But sometimes the glare of these huge, shiny events and the records in the book can blind us to what is happening off to the side, in the shadows, unnoticed.

And in the meantime, we keep encountering these stories in scripture that do exactly that...look beyond the glare, into the corners and into the shadows...away from the obvious. Just look at the Old Testament reading today. It is time for Samuel to anoint a new king. Saul, as you know, was the first king, but his children weren't working out and so Samuel had to look elsewhere. God tells Samuel to get over it...Saul didn't work out...but go to Bethlehem, and find Jesse. One of his sons will be the next king. As you might expect, Samuel assumes that the oldest, Eliab, would fit the bill and it is surprising that he has to work his way all the way down to the very youngest.

One commentator has this to say: "Once again we have a story that reminds us of the unlikely vessels of God's grace. God's choice is David, a shepherd, an eighth son, ...from a family that has no obvious pedigree...To choose the youngest son, who labors as a shepherd, to be Israel's future king is to ignore the usual arrangements for power and in the ancient world...Jesse is not described as 'a man of wealth'...the family tree of David is not distinguished. Jesse's grandmother was Ruth, an immigrant Moabite woman...His grandfather was Boaz, whose ancestors included a Canaanite woman who was almost executed for adultery...and a Canaanite prostitute from Jericho. In the world's usual power arrangements, this would not be the stuff of royal lineage, but in God's plans sometimes 'the last shall be first', even an absent eighth son tending the sheep.

Of course, the unlikely journey of God's grace through the line of David leads to Jesus, born in a stable...a carpenter's son, and finally a crucified criminal. But Jesus is the true anointed One...in whom God meets us for the most unlikely moments of grace. "¹

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, volume 2, page 1099-1100. Copyright 1998.

Jesus not only was unexpected himself, and descended from unlikely vessels of God's grace, he taught us about looking for the unexpected...he looked off to the side, in the shadows, at those usually unnoticed.

There is the time, at the temple treasury, where Jesus saw the rich putting in their gifts and he also saw a poor widow put in two copper coins...and it is this widow that catches his attention because her gift, small as it was objectively, represented far, far more generosity than the other gifts.

Or yet again, the parable today of the mustard seed. Take a look at the smallest of seeds. That is what the kingdom of God is like. It slips in unawares, but has this tremendous potential, indeed, inevitability.

We worship the Lord who told us, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them...for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:19ff)

And let me share just one more biblical passage, this time from the Old Testament. You remember the story of Elijah, after he'd been run out of town for proclaiming the Lord's name...he is standing there on the mountain waiting for the Lord to pass by. "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." (1 Kings 19:11 ff) And out of the silence, a still, small voice speaks...and it is the Lord.

In the silence, with the two or three gathered.... It is the widow's mite, the tiny mustard seed.... It is through the youngest child, out laboring in the field that God reveals the truth.

So look around your world, look into the shadows, beyond the glare, look off to the side, and toward what is usually unnoticed and see where God might be at work.

For me, one way I see God is at work in this way is with CirclesRVA². Circles does not fix a crisis, but make no change in the situation that caused the crisis. Rather, it is transformative and the goal is that people become secure and independent.

Many of you are involved with this effort and support of this community group as part of our [strategic plan](#), to help break the cycle of poverty in the City of Richmond.

At the heart of Circles is a group of three people. The first is the Circle Leader. This is the person driving the process, who wants to move to economic security, and does the work to develop a viable plan. They develop the plan and they work the plan. But not alone. Two allies work with them, offering emotional support and encouragement, and most importantly, sharing their connectivity, their social networks. You know it is true in this life often, that it is not what you know, but who you know. So the allies bring that to the table.

CirclesRVA will launch its first class, called a cohort, in August. It will be working with about 10 circle leaders. There are over 68,000 people in the City of Richmond living in poverty including over 15,000 children. I know that 10 people seems like a drop in the bucket compared to that.

But you know what? I see it as the mustard seed. I see it as exactly the kind of things that God favors, and my prayer is that it will grow and put forth large branches, and provide a safe and secure haven for all those who need it.

Where do you see the mustard seeds? Where, in the shadows, do you see God's hand at work in the world? Who is the eighth child laboring in the fields? Turn away from the glare. Turn away from all the success stories...and

² Please visit CirclesRVA.org to learn more.

look to the least of these. They are there in our life and you may just find God at work there and calling you to join.

So...glory to God whose power working in us can do greater things than we can ask or even imagine. Amen.