

## **The Great Power of Little Deeds**

Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33

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This ad ran in a London newspaper.

*Thank you to the man who gave me 20p in the car park at Middlesex Hospital last Tuesday morning when I found myself short for parking. Thanks to you I was able to see my father alive for the last time. He died that afternoon.*

*Farah, London*

That's about .26 cents. Pocket change. Yet that little deed meant a great deal to a woman named Farah. Twenty-six cents enabled her to see her father before he died.

The Bible is full of stories about the great power of little deeds. Remember young David going up against the Philistine giant named Goliath? The king actually objected: "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth."

Just a boy. Little. But we all remember what David did to Goliath.

There was another boy in the Gospel of John. Apparently his mom had sent him out with lunch that day. Not much. Just five loaves of barley bread and two fish. Little. Until he gave it to Jesus. Then it fed a multitude.

A poor widow went to the temple one day. Some wealthy people were giving large sums of money to the temple treasury. She gave two copper coins. Little. But Jesus commended the poor widow saying that she had given more than all the others because she gave all that she had.

Do you remember the woman named Tabitha? The book of Acts describes her this way: “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.” Little things, like “tunics and other clothing” she made. She died. Peter took her by the hand and said, “Tabitha, get up.” And she did.

Our scripture lesson for today teaches one of the great truths of life: we must never underestimate the great power of little deeds. We are mistaken if we think God always demands great deeds and extreme self-sacrifice. In fact, that expectation can be so intimidating that people shrink back, hold onto their little deed, thinking that it doesn’t really matter.

For everyone who has ever felt that way, Jesus told The Parable of the Mustard Seed and its companion The Parable of the Yeast. They are both what theologians call parables of contrast—that something so little can produce so much. In the first parable, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed, which he called “the smallest of all the seeds.” Now, people have argued for ages about whether the mustard seed is literally the smallest seed. Please don’t get sidetracked by that useless argument. The mustard plant described here is an annual herb, meaning that it dies at the end of each growing season. I have read that in one growing season it can produce a plant six feet tall. They say that in extraordinary cases it can grow to ten feet tall. So in one season, Jesus said, it could get large enough for birds to build their nests.

I have heard that on a hot day in Alabama with plenty of rain kudzu can grow a foot in length. If that’s true, you can almost watch it grow!

The mustard plant didn’t grow that fast, but it was known for its contrast. From something tiny, the smallest seed, something great could come. It’s surprising. It’s amazing. From the little comes something great.

The second parable is about a woman who “mixed” yeast with flour. At least, that’s what my translation says. Other translations say that she “hid” the yeast in the flour. I think that is a better translation. Our bakers, of course, know what happens when you hide live yeast in flour. If you add a little warm water and knead it with your hands, it grows. Those little grains of yeast hidden in the flour are alive, and they can cause a

little bit of flour to grow. Again, it's surprising. It's amazing. From the little comes something great.

It's always important to know the audience of Jesus' teachings. Who was he teaching here? Jesus did not tell these two parables to the crowds or the religious leaders. He told them to his twelve apostles. Remember, they are parables of contrast. Jesus was telling his disciples that the things they were doing might have seemed small and insignificant. It was still early in his ministry. So the crowds weren't huge yet. Maybe some of the apostles were wondering something like this:

*Have I made a mistake? This sure doesn't seem to be going anywhere fast? Maybe it's not too late for me to turn back.*

So Jesus told them these two parables of contrast. From something little—a little beginning, a little deed—something great could come. Something was hidden in that little beginning, something was alive in those little deeds, and because of that their little beginning and those little deeds were filled with great power.

I called this one of the great truths of life, and I really believe it is. We must never underestimate the great power of little deeds. 20 pence. So little. But it allowed a woman to be with her dying father. You give someone a ride to the doctor. It seems so little. You help a neighbor with a project in his yard. So little. You take a meal to someone who's just come home from the hospital. Little. You share some ripe tomatoes with a neighbor. You show patience with a clerk who is still learning her job. You give a little extra to a waitress who seems to need it. You take time to be with a teenager who needs someone to listen. All so little. Like a tiny mustard seed. But the teaching of Jesus here is that something is hidden in those little deeds. It is alive. Therefore, we must never underestimate the great power of little deeds.

I read a story recently about two boys who learned this lesson. The boys had both been given \$5 by their parents to spend in town. They walked together down a road that led through a field. The younger of the two boys noticed a man, a farmer, working hard out in the field. The farmer was wearing typical work clothes, overalls and boots, and his nicer clothes were stacked neatly off to the side.

The younger boy looked at his older friend and with a mischievous look in his eyes said, "Let's hide his shoes! When he comes in from the field, he won't be able to find them. The expression on his face will be priceless!"

The two boys laughed and laughed.

The older of the two boys then paused and thought for a while. After a few moments he said, "The man looks poor. See his clothes? Even his good clothes are tattered. I've got a better idea. Let's hide a five dollar bill in each shoe, and then we'll hide in these bushes and see how he reacts to that, instead."

The younger boy agreed, and they placed a five-dollar bill in each of his shoes and hid behind the bushes. It wasn't long before the hot and exhausted farmer came in from the field. He reached down and pulled on a shoe, immediately feeling the bill under his foot.

He took out the five-dollar bill, held it between his fingers, and looked around to see who could have put it in his shoe. But no one was there. He held the bill in his hand and stared at it in disbelief. Confused, he slid his other foot into his other shoe and felt the second bill. This time the man was overwhelmed when he removed the second five-dollar bill from his shoe.

Thinking he was alone, the farmer dropped to his knees and offered a prayer that the boys could easily hear from their hiding place. They heard the poor farmer cry tears of relief and gratitude. He spoke of his sick wife and his boys in need of food. He expressed gratitude for this unexpected bounty from unknown hands.

We never know, do we? We never know the full impact of a little deed. Twenty pence. A ride to a doctor. A little extra to a waitress. Jesus said that they may begin little, but there is something hidden in those little deeds that can produce something great. So let us never underestimate the great power of little deeds.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, please take all of our little deeds and fill them with the power of the Kingdom of God. Amen.