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SEEDS

Mostly the world gets better—or worse—through small steps taken by ordinary people. Even God seems to work this way for the most part. That’s why Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to the working of yeast, whose microscopic activities will transform a whole loaf of bread bit by tiny bit. In another parable, Jesus says that God’s Kingdom is like a grain planted in a field. It sprouts, put down roots, rises in a blade of green, then a stalk, and finally full head of grain—a mysterious cooperation between human and earth and God.

As we think today about the wonder of God’s creation and our place in this good world, instead of a single sermon, I want to offer several brief sermon seeds scattered through the service, small ideas for us to consider, small ways we might make a difference, small decisions that bit by tiny bit might make a better world for our kids and our grandkids.

The old song says, “Little things mean a lot.” Jesus puts it this way: “The one who is faithful in little, is also faithful in much.”

WASTE NOT – John 6:12

God is the original recycler. Just look at how the created world works. Nothing goes to waste. Everything gets used and reused...over and over.

When Jesus came, he was a recycler, too, just like his Father. Maybe Jesus learned recycling in Joseph’s carpentry shop. Timber was scarce in first-century Israel. A few years ago, the archaeologists discovered a fishing boat long submerged in the Sea of Galilee, a ship dating roughly from the time of Jesus. The boat contains wood apparently salvaged from older junked boats. In fact, the construction is a hodge-podge of different woods: cedar, pine, oak, willow, hawthorn, redbud, and others. The guiding principle of that ancient boat builder was clearly, “Let no scrap go to waste.” As a carpenter of modest means, Jesus would have learned quite early that wood was too precious to squander.

Jesus carried the lesson over into his ministry where the emphasis was on people. Children of God are too precious to waste. Jesus gave his heart to recycling people: guiding the lost, challenging the lazy, healing the sick, redeeming the sinful, even raising the dead. In so many ways, our culture treats us as if we were disposable. Jesus says no! Jesus says we have a purpose and a future. Jesus says let nothing—and no one—be wasted!

Here’s one way to read the Bible story. God tried throwing people away and didn’t like it. When the world was a mess, God sent a flood to wash everyone away and start fresh. But it must have left a bad taste, because when the waters receded, God said, “I’m not going to do that again. The work of my hands—my creatures, my children—means too much to me. It’s not my way to be so wasteful. I’m going to find a way to salvage all this.” So God sent Jesus, not to condemn, but to save; not to destroy, but to recycle.

So if you see your pastor fishing a plastic bottle out of a church garbage can and moving it to the recycling bin or climbing into a construction dumpster to rescue a two-by-four, try not to be embarrassed. Just say to yourself, “Oh, there’s Mike trying to be like Jesus.”

Feel free to join me.

DROP THAT AXE! - Deuteronomy 20:19

The very old words of the Bible sometimes surprise us by speaking so clearly to our modern needs. Here’s a good example from the book of Deuteronomy, a bit of practical advice to be practiced

during times of warfare. “If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?”

I could talk on this verse all day, but let me draw out just two ideas. First, in the pressure of the moment we will generally assume that our immediate needs must take top priority.

“We’ve got to take this town! Cut those fruit trees for firewood!”

“We’re running out of oil. Of course, we have to drill there!”

“We can’t sell apples with blemishes. Of course, we need more pesticide.”

“I don’t care what it costs! Turn that thermostat up (or down)!”

The three thousand year-old advice from Deuteronomy suggests that at least sometimes the needs of the trees outweigh the human needs of the moment. That’s worth thinking about.

The other lesson I would draw from this verse is more pragmatic. After the war is over and the dead are buried, the living still need to eat. How is life supposed to go on if the summer is past and we have cut down all the fruit trees? Common sense suggests that we should take care of the limb we’re sitting on. The more we hack away at the creation, the closer we get to sawing off the limb that is keeping us safe.

TAKE A WALK - Romans 1:20

“Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”

Paul lifts up one of the most sensible and straightforward principles in the Bible: The creation reveals the Creator. The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky displays his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1) And it’s not just the lovely things. The wisdom teacher of Proverbs says, “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider its ways and be wise.” That’s why Jesus says, “Consider the ravens, how God feeds them.”

In other words, take a walk. Feel some weather. See some bugs. Get mud on your shoes. Plant something. Go on a picnic. Pray al fresco. Because God is out there, saying, “Hey! Here I am! Pay attention!”

Never mind that walking to the drugstore will cut down on pollution, preserve fossil fuels, and extend the life of that environmentally expensive automobile. Never mind that walking will improve the health of that little piece of creation called you. Never mind that neighborhoods where people walk around are safer and friendlier.

No, just get out there in creation because the Creator will meet you there. It’s hard to really care about what we keep at a distance. That’s why Jews have so often been shunted off into ghettos and blacks into slums and Indians onto reservations. Out of sight, out of mind. We don’t love what we never see. The more we isolate ourselves from the created world with all its wildness and beauty and inconvenience and fragility, the less likely we are to really care about the creation. And it is a very small step from ignoring creation to ignoring the Creator.

LEARN THE LESSON OF LESS – 1 Timothy 6:6-10

The teachings of the Bible and the values of our culture often go head to head. For instance, our culture takes as an unquestioned truth the proposition that “More is better.” More money, more belongings, more square footage, more convenience. But the Bible says, “Enough is enough.”

There’s a wonderful Old Testament proverb that says, “I ask of you, O Lord, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”

(Proverbs 30:7-9) Save me, God, from not having enough; but protect me also, O God, from having too much.

Here's the New Testament teaching: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

As a middle-class American, when I read Bible verses like these, I feel like I live in a glass house and I shouldn't be throwing stones at anybody else. But let's be honest. Our insatiable need for more and more of everything carries a price tag, and it's usually the creation that pays the cost.

Here's a modest suggestion for all of us well-to-do Americans. We are well accustomed to asking ourselves, "How can I get that?" Maybe once in a while we might change the questions, and ask ourselves, "How can I get by without that?"

BE A GOOD BORROWER – Job 41:11

Allow me a gross simplification. I suspect there are two kinds of people in the world. There are people who borrow something and tear it up because, after all, it's not theirs. And there are people who borrow something and take extra good care of it because, after all, it's not theirs.

Thus says the Lord: Everything under heaven belongs to me. This rich, abundant, wonderful world is not yours and mine; it is borrowed from God.

How we treat our world reveals which kind of person we are: the kind of person who gives back a borrowed thing in at least as good a shape as when we got it or the kind of person who borrows something beautiful and gives back something broken.

Let this part of our offering: to clean up something, to preserve something, to plant something, to beautify something, to nurture something, to feed something, to improve on what we have borrowed.

Soli Deo Glora!