

“The Little Picture”  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45  
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 30, 2023  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Did I ever tell you about the time that someone was snoring through a sermon I was preaching?

I may have mentioned this before, I don't recall.  
It was years ago, in a different congregation...I was about 7 or 8 minutes into the sermon.

And I suddenly noticed a low, rumbling, heavy breathing sound.  
Is that someone snoring?  
I think it's someone snoring!

I tried to ignore it, but it got louder, and then louder...  
Pretty soon, the people sitting close to that person were starting to giggle.

Then the row in front started to giggle. Then the row behind started to giggle. I should have just stopped preaching, waved the white flag.

On another occasion—this was a DIFFERENT person, same church—a very kind, elderly lady came through the line after worship and apologized that her husband had fallen asleep in worship.

He wasn't snoring.  
And I told her I hadn't noticed he was asleep.

She said, “He's been having the most difficult time sleeping at night. We think it's his medication...but when he comes here to worship and you start preaching, it's the most peaceful 20 minutes he gets all week. I don't want to wake him up! I hope you won't be offended...”

None taken, I replied.

You know, if church can provide the most peaceful 20 minutes in a person's week, then it's doing something good.

Of course, even with all the good that many churches ARE doing these days, all the good that our own church is doing—on a national scale, it's not exactly bringing people through the doors.

I'm sure you've heard the statistics. In the past 25 years, 40 million Americans have stopped going to church.<sup>1</sup> In our own denomination, membership has declined 62% over that same time.<sup>2</sup>

Jessica Grose has written a series of articles in *The New York Times* this summer exploring the topic of why this is the case—not just for churches, but across religious faith throughout America.

In her latest article, she writes:

*When Sydney Schnurr's husband was diagnosed with cancer...right in the middle of Covid, her local hiking group in Colorado showed up for her right away. Just a few days after word of his illness got out, someone in the group set up a meal train for the days her husband was in treatment and fellow hikers offered to drive them on their long trips to the hospital.*

*[Sydney], who is 70 and describes herself as a "recovering P.K." — preacher's kid — was raised Episcopalian and said that she'll never go back to the institutional church. But her hiking group, which is*

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<sup>1</sup> Jake Meador, "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church," *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2023, [Why Did So Many People Stop Going to Church? - The Atlantic](#).

<sup>2</sup> Found at [End of Presbyterianism: Farewell PC\(USA\)? \(#2048\) \(sowhatfaith.com\)](#).

*locally run, “feels like a church,” she said, because the people in it “take care of each other.”*<sup>3</sup>

It's the kind of story that raises some fundamental questions:  
 What is God's Church for?  
 What makes us unique?  
 What can we offer that no one else in society can offer?  
 And what does that mean for the future of the Church?

I raise these questions because of the parables that Jesus provides for us this morning. The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew is chalk full of parables, all of which are related to what it means to be God's Church.

In our text for today, we heard a series of very short parables—  
 rapid-fire metaphors, if you will:  
***The kingdom of heaven is like....***

And when Jesus says, “Kingdom of heaven,” don't think “heaven” in terms of where we go after we die.

Jesus is talking about how we live before we die.  
 He's talking about what it means to be God's Church.

The first two parables that you heard are all about growth.  
 A seed that becomes a tree, yeast that transforms dough into bread.

You remember how Jesus described it...

*“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

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<sup>3</sup> Jessica Grose, “The Church of Group Fitness,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2023, [Opinion | The Church of Group Fitness - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/26/opinion/the-church-of-group-fitness.html).

At first blush, the meaning seems pretty straightforward.

As one biblical scholar puts it:

“The kingdom of heaven starts very small (one man, Jesus, preaching in an out-of-the-way corner of the world); but, like a tiny [mustard] seed developing into a mighty tree...  
the kingdom will expand to magnificent size.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s not a bad description of what’s happened to Westminster, right?

We are now over a congregation of over 2,000 members.

In our 76 years, we too started from something very small—  
an idea that some members of First Presbyterian had,  
or better yet, an idea that the Holy Spirit **PLANTED**,  
like a seed, in their souls...

And they left their home church, and what those Charter members started, way back in 1947 with a tent, has grown into something that most likely **NONE** of them would have ever pictured at that time.

It’s almost as if Westminster is a perfect example of this morning’s first parable. But let’s pause for just a moment. Does anyone here know what happens when a mustard seed is planted?

It grows into **SOMETHING**...but as those members of the first century church would have known, a mustard seed does **NOT** become a large and glorious tree!

Here’s what one Bible Dictionary has to say:

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

“A mustard seed is “...a plant...[an] annual herb with varieties from 2 to 6 feet in height...and it produces a large number of small yellow flowers.”<sup>5</sup>

What a minute.

Where are the birds in the branches?

Where is the large and glorious tree?

The church in which I grew up back in Michigan is going to celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary soon. Ten years ago, when it was celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it invited the Rev. Dr. Ron Byars, the pastor who baptized me back in the 1970s, to preach in that pulpit once again.

In his sermon at the anniversary celebration, he said the following to his former congregation:

“When I became the first full-time pastor here...back in 1968, I did not expect to see what I’m seeing now: more churches being closed than opened.

“I really thought the respected Protestant churches would get a second wind and grow deeper as well as stronger as the years went by. I had never once seen a church building turned into a bar or a condo and never expected to.”

Then he went on:

“...but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, [we] who still gather for worship have become the odd ones, the ones swimming against the stream.

Where is God in all this?

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<sup>5</sup> Irene & Walter Jacob, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 2, David Noel Freedman, Editor-In-Chief, New York: Doubleday, 1992.

“We’re out on a limb here.

“If God and the church are on intimate terms, what’s going on [with all this mainline church decline]?”

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That’s the question that MOST churches in our denomination and other mainline denominations are asking these days:

What in the world is going on?

In fact, Ryan Burge—who is a professor at Eastern Illinois University and who has done extensive statistical research on religious and political trends in American life—he did a deep dive recently into our own denomination’s membership trends...and he has predicted that there is a fighting chance that within the next 20 years, our denomination—will cease to exist!<sup>6</sup>

Of course, so much of what’s happening out there in so many Presbyterian churches—is NOT what you and I are experiencing in here.

Westminster is very fortunate to find ourselves in an odd position—because unlike so many of our sister churches, we’re still a growing church.

It doesn’t feel, when you walk through these doors, like we’re out on a limb.

And yet, it’s also true that the world is CHANGING outside our walls. And it would be a HUGE mistake to imagine that we can somehow lie back on our laurels, cool our heels...

and take our growth for granted.

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<sup>6</sup> [End of Presbyterianism: Farewell PC\(USA\)? \(#2048\) \(sowhatfaith.com\)](#)

All of which brings us back to the first question I asked:  
**What's unique about being the Church?**

Getting back to Ryan Burge, in a recent article, he writes:

“Increasingly religion has become the enclave for those who have lived a ‘proper’ life: college degree, middle class income, married with children. If you check all those boxes, the likelihood of you regularly attending church is about double the rate of folks who don’t.

This is not just troubling for churches, he says.

“This is also troublesome for American democracy, as well. Religion, at it’s best, is a place where people from a variety of economic, social, racial and political backgrounds can find common ground around a shared faith. It’s a place to build bridges to folks who are different than you.

“Unfortunately, it looks like American religion...  
 [and this extends well beyond our own denomination]  
 is not at its best.

“Instead, it’s become,” he argues, ‘a hospital for the healthy, an echo chamber for folks who did everything ‘right,’ which means that it’s seeming less and less inviting to those who did life another way.

“Do I think,” he concludes, “that houses of worship have done this on purpose?”

Generally speaking, no.  
 But they also haven’t actively refuted this narrative.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [Religion Has Become A Luxury Good For The Middle Class, Married College Graduate With Children \(religionunplugged.com\)](http://religionunplugged.com)

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Now THAT'S a provocative argument.  
And it begs an interesting question:

What would it look like for Westminster—our healthy, growing congregation of Open Minds Open Hearts—to actively refute that narrative?

Let me be the first to say that in some ways, we already do.

We are not a red church or a blue church.  
You've heard me say before, we are a what?  
A purple church filled with people from both sides of the political aisle, and a few aisles in between.

Around town, we may be known as a “progressive” church, but I prefer to say that we're a HOSPITABLE church, and that our vision of Open Minds Open Hearts is not just descriptive but prescriptive, and gives us something to continue to strive toward...

Of course, once we say that, we need focus every day on that pillar of hospitality and that promise to be open.

We need to move from the big picture—hospitality—  
to the little picture,  
the particular picture...

To the faces of the world and the need around us.  
And to ask ourselves what our neighbors truly need from us.

For example, you heard me ask in a sermon a few months ago what it might look like for people, who are formerly incarcerated to attend worship here...



Or for us to be intentional about the ways we welcome families with children who have disabilities or developmental differences when they come here...

Do people who are transgender feel welcome within our walls?  
If we don't know the answer to that question, how can we find out?

Would someone who is struggling to pay their bills on a weekly basis feel like there's a place for them in these pews?

Or how about those who have no church background?

Or how about those who do have a church background, but they've been hurt by the church, or bored by the church, and when they walk through our doors, their faith is hanging by a thread?

How are we doing not just with welcoming these people, but seeking out these children of God who may be too uncomfortable to find us and enter these doors on their own?

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I once heard a colleague of mine, the Rev. Thom Lamb, tell about when he was a newly ordained minister almost 40 years ago.

At that time, Thom met a man named Harold Steele.

Harold was working at Attica State Prison, where he ran 5 different groups for men who were incarcerated there. The recidivism rate for Attica at that time was 85%...but for the men involved in Harold's ministry, the rate was 15%.

So, my colleague Thom Lamb, newly ordained, accepted Harold's invitation to join him one day on a visit to Attica.

Lamb says, “I was a bit unnerved when they slammed the door behind me and the guards led us inside the walls to the room where we would meet with 20 or so inmates.

“When everyone had gathered, Harold introduced me as The Reverend Thom Lamb.”

To which I responded, “You can just call me Thom.”

Lamb goes on to say that the discussion that day was “no G-rated deal.”

There was confrontation, accountability, acceptance—but from the start, “one of the inmates...was staring [me] down,” Thom said.

“Every time I would look his way, he would be staring back at me. When it came time for one last comment, [he] finally spoke up.

“He looked at me:

‘Tell me something, ‘Just call me Thom’—  
can you be the Rev. Thomas Lamb if I need you to be?’

Because I don’t need no pals.

I need a Pastor.

Can you do it, ‘Just Thom?’”

Lamb goes on to say that Harold Steele, the one who invited him to come, talked to him on the ride home. He told Thom that those men did not need informality. They needed him to be the very presence of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From the transcript of a sermon preached by the Rev. Thomas Lamb at a meeting of Grace Presbytery approximately 10 years ago.

What is it that the Church can offer that nothing else in society can do?

We can be the presence of Christ.  
Because that's what we're called to do.

It means for a church like Westminster, growth is absolutely a good thing...but it's not the most important thing.

The most important thing...is:  
Welcoming like Christ.  
Being generous like Christ.  
Loving like Christ.  
Forgiving like Christ.  
Serving like Christ.  
Befriending the poor and the powerless, like Christ.  
Being willing to carry a cross for anyone, just like Jesus Christ.

You see, in the last two parables we heard today, Jesus describes a person, an imaginary person, who treats this way of living, like someone who finds a treasure hidden in a field, someone who discovers a pearl of immense value, and sells everything they have to buy that field, to purchase that pearl. In other words, the imaginary persons in the last two parables are completely committed to the treasure that's been found, to living and loving like Jesus Christ, no matter the cost.

I say they're imaginary people.  
Maybe.  
Or maybe, when Jesus told these parables, maybe he was thinking of you.

Amen.