

Sermon June 17, 2018 It's What's in your Heart Cara B. Hochhalter

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 and Mark 4:26-34

Are you feeling more expansive? Like you are part of something bigger...some new thing is about to broaden the possibilities for how we are church? Well....you are! At the United Church of Christ annual meeting that your delegates, Nancy and Linda and I just attended this weekend in Springfield....there was an historic vote.

After years of consideration and discernment, our three UCC conferences of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island...have overwhelmingly voted to join together as one Conference. It will be approved by the General Synod in the summer of 2019 and then will be fully operational by January 1, 2020.

This is exciting! As part of a larger body, you will have the resources, energy and ideas from churches in this now 600-church region. For instance, if our church wants to take on disaster relief, homelessness, immigration, environmental sustainability...or any number of issues....we could find out what other churches are doing so that we can partner and share information.

It is an invitation...it is bold....and it was done through much prayer and discernment for what will be best for the ways that we live the love of God for the good of all. So, take a deep breath...and just know, that you are indeed....part of something bigger, today.

Let us be in prayer: Expansive God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now to our stories: God is trying to help the prophet Samuel choose a new king. Saul, the previous king is rejected for disobeying God's commandments...and God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem and particularly to the house of Jesse, who, by the way, was the grandson of Ruth. Samuel goes there, taking along some elders in the town as witnesses. He asks Jesse to line up his seven sons. As he approaches each one, he feels that God is saying... "No, not this one." And God tells Samuel that it is what is in the person's *heart* ...not his appearance...that God is looking for!

Samuel moves right down the line looking for a future king, until there are no more sons standing there. This process of choosing is breaking with tradition as it would normally be the eldest son to receive such an honor... the obvious choice, the one the

political pundits would choose today...the one with the best numbers in the polls or the best faces for television...these do not seem to be the qualifiers.

Samuel asks Jesse if there are any more sons... Jesse replies, "Well, yes, the youngest is out on the hillside with the sheep. His name is David." And when this young shepherd boy appears, God says, "Bingo!" Samuel knows that David is the one to be the future king....and oil is poured on his head.

Samuel could "hear" God. The Hebrew word, *sama*, is repeated throughout this text and it means to listen, to hear....it also means to trust that hearing and respond. To trust that hearing and respond.

Do you sometimes think God is talking to you...nudging you to do this or that? There are times when I am not sure when it is the right moment to go to visit someone in the hospital or who is close to final moments...should I go late at night...wait until the morning? I pray something like..."Oh, God...may the time that I go, be right." And so often, it seems to be... Sometimes it takes a comment from Jeff who says, "You better go now." I am beginning to trust...God-timing.

Perhaps we can all learn "sama"...listening and responding to some sense of the Divine...I do believe the mystery of God interacts in our lives....if we can learn how to hear these Holy nudges.

Samuel "heard" God and chose an unexpected one...to become the next king. A young boy...perhaps it was similar to the way a young boy is chosen to be the next Dalai Llama? God told Samuel it was by looking into his heart that he would know. A small boy....to become king.

In our Gospel story, it is a small mustard seed...that is to become the realm of God. To grow so big that birds can live in its branches! Again, it is about something within...some small thing...that can create great change!

Listen to the way Reynolds Price tells this parable: "And Jesus said, 'To what can we liken the reign of God? Or in what parable could we put it?—like a grain of mustard which when it's sown on the ground is smaller than all seeds on the Earth but when it's sown grows up and becomes greater than all plants and makes big branches so the birds of the air can live under its shadow.'" Jesus told stories, parables like this to awaken people's imaginations.

Mustard was not a plant known to grow as tall as trees...AND mustard was an invasive plant in Biblical times and in our times, too! There is a passage in Leviticus that even prohibits mustard from being planted in anyone's fields! The people must have been shocked to hear Jesus say that the REIGN OF GOD...God's Kingdom on Earth...will be like planting an invasive weed!?

Perhaps it has to do with the power---- and contagiousness....of something as small as a loving act. Like the spread of an invasive plant....have you known people whose love for others, whose honesty and integrity, whose faith and compassion...makes you want to do the same? We get inspired, don't we by such people. It is like a seed of Holy Love has been planted and wants to spread...in each of our hearts!

Can we hold on to this small thing that lies on our hearts...what must we do to nurture it within ourselves and one another? What is this God-thing....*in* your heart...that can grow so big? This small thing that can change people's lives...can even change the direction of nations! Whoa...this is more precious...than gold!

I want to share two stories. On Friday night, we got to hear the amazing preacher and our UCC Executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries of our national church, The Rev. Tracy Blackmon. Please do look her up and listen to her online, if you can. She told two stories that fit very nicely, (thank you, Tracy!) with our theme of small things, of unexpected people....rising up.

The first is about herself....Tracy Blackmon lived in St. Louis, MO....a divorced, black, mother of three grown children....who during her lunch break from work, wandered into Eden Seminary just to see what it was about. Without having the money nor the time to fill out an application...she found herself, the very, next Monday, sitting in her first class. God looks into people's hearts....and opens doors....and now she is an ordained UCC minister and national leader of faith.

The next story is one she told us about something that happened at her church in Florissant, Missouri. She said that on Easter Sunday, the children stand before the congregation and tell their "Resurrection Stories." And one little boy was supposed to go first. But he started to cry and refused to open his mouth so he went to the end of the line. When the other children had all told their "Resurrection Stories" they were about to sit down when that first little boy came running up and said "Wait!" And then he told his story. Rev. Blackmon went to him later and asked how he got the courage to tell his story and how did he get over his fear. He told her, "I didn't. I just *did it scared.*" I just did it scared. Sometimes what God nudges us to do....is scary.

God can enable great things to happen...through unexpected people in unexpected ways. Let each of us nurture that small space in our hearts that holds the love of God...let us nurture it like a small seedling that yearns for the light. Let us know that every person has a place in their heart that holds a piece of this creative love...we are born with it...and we are called to listen to the ways God wants to move within us!

Henry David Thoreau supposedly said, "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders!"

May you all be blessed this day...fathers, too!

Amen.