

**September 6, 2021 | Summer worship service**

**TEXT: [Matthew 18:15–20](#)**

**TITLE: The Art of Thinking Small**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

One of the many things the pandemic took away from us was graduation season, commencement ceremonies in which valedictorians, college presidents and celebrities exhorted graduating seniors to think big—to strive for the stars. They were to imagine world peace, stop climate change, cure diseases, end poverty, and hand off a better planet to their children than the one they'd received from their elders. Thoreau might be quoted: *"If you build castles in the air, your work need not be lost for that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."* Graduation speeches encourage us to dream dreams, strive for goals, and to think big.

But there's a value to thinking small too. You don't hear about it much at commencement ceremonies, but it is real and very important. Thinking small is the art of paying attention to details, of honoring even small obligations and keeping every promise. It is the attentiveness parents have when infants begin to crawl and are prone to putting things in their mouths; or when you bring a new puppy home and look over at them asking yourself "What is that dog chewing on now?" It is the art of counting out exchange change for the cashier, of using a tiny screwdriver to fix the loose screw in the frame of your glasses, or of taking the time to listen carefully to every word your child is telling you or your parent is saying or the question you're being asked by a stranger on the street.

The art of thinking small is like a shepherd who leaves behind a big flock of 99 sheep in order to find one lost lamb. It's like a tiny mustard seed that is barely visible when you place it in the soil, but which in time becomes a bush large enough for birds to build their nests in. Jesus actually talked a lot about thinking small, sometimes in surprising ways and passages in which he never used the word "small" at all—like in today's gospel reading.

On the surface, the verses I read from Matthew 18 sound less like scripture and more like something you would read in a company's personnel manual: *If someone sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If they listen to you, you have regained them. If you are not listened to, take one or two others with you so that every word can be confirmed by evidence. And if this person still refuses to listen, tell it to the church.* It is sad to imagine that church conflict is as old as the church itself, but then churches are made of people and people are always prone to disagree with one another. Teddy Roosevelt's daughter Alice once famously said, "If you can't say something nice about someone else, come sit next to me." To adapt another biblical metaphor, seeds of faith are planted and take root in churches, but sometimes weeds of jealousy, of petty disagreement and misunderstanding grow up around the young seedlings and crush them before they can bear fruit.

Consider carefully Jesus' advice on church conflict resolution. First, he wants us to think small and keep conflict contained to the smallest appropriate group. If one person sins against you, then talk to that person when you're alone. Despite what Alice Roosevelt said, we shouldn't spread gossip; we shouldn't tell others about how we're offended by someone's action so as to build up a coalition of people who are on "our side." If it is possible, keep a problem between two people to just those two people. Find a time to talk face to face, to listen carefully, and seek to make things right. That's the second important part of Jesus' words. The goal of this "thinking small art of conflict resolution" is not to win and prove you were right and the other person was wrong. The goal is reconciliation. It is restoration. It is welcoming the lost sheep back in the flock; it is opening the door so whoever has felt ostracized or marginalized or pushed out can faithfully be welcomed back in. Read what the apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 12 about how the body is made up of interdependent members; so the eye can't say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor the stronger parts say to the weaker parts, "We have no need for you."

Where there is division, we need to talk one to one, seeking peace and reconciliation. Later, if a wise friend can help as a mediator—all the better. If two friends come along to ensure that everyone's position is clearly heard and respected, that's good too. And if all that doesn't work, then a hard yet faithful conversation needs to happen in the entire church—not a trial of the one person accused of sin, but an honest conversation that begins by asking "How is it possible that we allowed one lamb of ours to stray in the first place? How might our choices, our self-interests and honestly our sins have caused this break in the body of Christ?" It is in the art of looking carefully and humbly at ourselves that we are able to see with the eyes of Christ and act for peace in our family, in our church, and in our world.

As you are all aware, it is less than two months before our next presidential election. Already things are quite tense. The language of division, of "us vs. them" is rampant. After the 2016 election, our Session had some hard, honest conversations. Not everyone had voted for the same candidate, and some were critical of the messaging they'd been hearing from the pulpit and in the pews. As one way to better practice what we preach, our Session reached out to a sister congregation in Zelienople—Calvin Presbyterian Church—and had two face-to-face gatherings in which we discussed how that election had strained our families at home and our church families as well. I heard perspectives I hadn't heard before, and a level of trust was established. A week from Tuesday we're meeting again with the Calvin church Session. We will rekindle our friendship and talk about our hopes and fears as we approach another hard election season. If before we were reactive, now we want to be proactive. It will be a small conversation given the war of words in America right now; but Christ calls us to think small and act faithfully even in the little things of life.

One last bit of wisdom is found in today's passage. Notice that Jesus never says, "I'll be with you once you fill your mega-churches with converts, or pack your pews with hundreds of members." No, Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Where two people sit down quietly to talk and bring peace to a

broken relationship, Christ is present. Where three people listen to one another's hurts and fears and long for healing in their mutual lives, Christ is present. When a small group comes together around a table in which cups of juice and cubes of bread are handed out, somehow wonderfully, mystically, joyfully Christ is there. That's his promise for us and our greatest comfort as we walk whatever road unfolds before us.

The author Madeleine L'Engle once said, "It is easier to be cosmic than to be particular...Of course we'd rather have something more dramatic and spectacular, so we tend not to see the [small] opportunities for peacemaking that are presented us each day. But their smallness does not make them lesser opportunities." [*The Irrational Season*, p. 83–84]

There is a definite art to thinking small. Smallness, as in one-on-one conversations, a smile given to a tired worker, a moment of real attention given to a frustrated child, an honest effort to repair a broken friendship, a sincere word or prayer spoken out of love and genuine concern—they may all seem like such small, insignificant things. But of such is the kingdom of God. Right here. Right now.

AMEN