

Small Irritations

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on July 26th, 2026 – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46)

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Small irritations can lead to big results, sometimes.

Jesus in a series of parables has stories of what are I think are three things that irritate with big results. Mustard seeds, yeast and grains of sand. Where is the story about grains of sand I hear you ask, well it is not in the passage before us today, but let me explain a little later.

In this part of Matthew we have Jesus telling a series of parables as he tries to explain what the kingdom of heaven is like, as he tries to explain the inexplicable, as he tries to give us a glimpse of life with God.

Parables have layers of meaning, are evocative, are designed to make us think, are often subversive, often go against conventional wisdom and can be a bit ambiguous.

This morning I want to think about the parables of mustard seeds, yeast and pearls and explore their subversive nature and even their ambiguity.

First the mustard seed. A parable about how something starts out small, yet when it is properly nurtured grows and provides shelter for many, at least that is how we have traditionally understood it. Mustard seeds are not the smallest seed in the world, nor do they grow into the largest tree. Rather they grow into a bushy kind of weed, farmers often saw them as a nuisance. Why is Jesus telling this story then, what is he trying to say? Perhaps he is suggesting that the kingdom of heaven is not something big and flashy, rather a bit weedy, a bit ordinary, but still a place where small little birds looking for shelter might find protection from predators. Perhaps he is reminding us that the kingdom of heaven is a bit hidden and to be found in unexpected places. Note though, that the seed needs help, it must be sown and nurtured to grow into that place of safety and shelter.

Second, yeast. Is there anything more evocative than freshly baked bread, who can resist tearing off a bit of it whilst it is still warm and putting lashings of butter and perhaps jam on it. In Jesus' time the people did not use yeast in their bread, they ate flat bread or unleavened bread. This parable probably spoke to the women listening more than the men, after all it was the women who did the baking. So why tell this parable? Jesus is using an image from the kitchen, something familiar and yet adding something not so familiar, causing people to stop and think. Again, yeast is small but has a big effect, just a little bit permeates the dough and causes it to rise. This is an image of abundance, a reminder of just how much God's love can transform the world. The yeast needs help - it must be mixed with ordinary ingredients and then kneaded, knocked down, kneaded again and baked to become that inviting aromatic bread, to become that loaf of abundance.

Third, pearls. I know a thing or two about the value and preciousness of pearls. I stood outside the shop of Paspaly Pearls in Darwin and saw their prices; I would need to sell my house to pay for some of them. I have also done the tour in Darwin that looks at just how dangerous it was for pearl divers to look for those pearls. Pearl divers wore heavy armour to dive for these precious gems, and many died doing so. When I turned 21 my

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grandfather gave me, like he had given his two daughters, a string of pearls. Despite his increasing frailty, deafness and lack of experience on Melbourne trains and trams he took himself to Melbourne to buy my string. Years later they were stolen in a break-in in the house I was living, they were irreplaceable, precious to me and I would have done anything to get that string back

Pearls start off as an irritation in an oyster shell. They are formed by grains of sand within the shell irritating that shell and forming the little pearl. I don't imagine any two are the same.

Irritating, precious, unique, valuable or maybe invaluable, that is how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven and any discerning person would be willing to pay a great price to be part of it.

All of these parables have a number of things in common. The kingdom of heaven is imaged as something small that with a little bit of help, a little bit of activity grows into something bigger and transforms the world in some way. They are all a little bit subversive. They are all a bit surprising to both the original hearers of these parables and to us reading them now.

What challenge do they provide for us here at Footscray Baptist Church?

Like the images used in these parables, we too are small. The kingdom of heaven is amongst us, and the parables challenge us to think about what we are doing with that.

Are we planting the love that is God, in the community, nurturing the seedling and helping it grow so that provides safety and shelter for those in our community needing such - the homeless, those living with mental health challenges, the asylum seeker, the survivor of domestic violence, those who are hungry, those who are anxious, those who are curious and those who are seeking to understand themselves and the world around them?

Are we mixing a little bit of love into the world around us, so love permeates rather than hate? Are we spreading love in the face of the Pauline Hanson's of the world who want to return to the White Australia policy, who call for mass deportation, who seek to destroy the wonderful multicultural tapestry we have come to know and love in this country?

Are we an irritation in the side of those in power, those who exploit others, those who hand out injustice to others? Are we agitating for change? Are we agitating for peace? Are we standing up for the environment, for those adversely affected by the increasing prominence of AI, for those who marginalized because they don't conform to the 'norm' sold by influencers? Are we agitating for the dignity and respect of everyone not matter who they are and what they are like? Are we irritating for beauty, for all to be known as valuable and precious.

When we take the gift of the kingdom of God and work with it - sow and nurture it, mix and knead it, irritate, the results will be surprising, unexpected, transformative, precious and abundant.

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Go out into the world ready to sow seeds that lead to safety and shelter for others, kneading a little bit of love into all we do and irritating for justice and peace. Amen.