

The Greatest Miracle is in the Least

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Hispanic Leadership Meeting (UMC)
Elizabeth, New Jersey
February 28, 1999

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Biblical Passage: Luke 13: 10-21 (NIV)

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The passage is well known. Perhaps too well known. If you are like me, probably when I began reading the text you said, "Ah, another miracle of healing," and then let your mind wander to other things.

But what we have in this text is not just one more healing story. What we have here is the confluence of ancient and seemingly invincible powers, all converging at that moment in that synagogue.

It was the Sabbath, in the synagogue, and a woman comes in. She has been crippled, bent up, crushed, for eighteen years. With her, also enters what we religious people try to keep out of our sight and out of our churches: the crushing reality of the power of evil, the mystery of suffering.

It was the Sabbath, a day set aside for rest from the earliest times of the Hebrew tradition: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord your God.”

Wise counsel from a God who knows that this human creature cannot work and work without repose.

But a day that religious folk had managed to make a day of ever greater difficulties.

It was a sabbath. In the synagogue. Precisely the place where the laws regarding the sabbath were studied, analyzed, exaggerated.

A sabbath in the synagogue, and the crippled woman walks in. But there is another present there: Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of creation.

What will Jesus do? On the one hand, in that woman's oppression, the very power of evil is confronting him. On the other hand, in the atmosphere of the synagogue, in the very Law of Israel, in the leader of the synagogue, the message is clear: There is nothing to be done.

Later on, in the very next chapter of Luke, there is a similar case. Jesus is at the home of a Pharisee when a sick man comes in. Jesus asks: "May one cure people on the sabbath?" And when they do not respond, he answers his own question by healing the man. Can you heal on the sabbath? **Yes you can.**

Now Jesus is at the synagogue, facing a woman who is bent, crushed by the power of suffering. And onto her oppression of eighteen years, the religious leaders pile another of umpteen centuries: It's the sabbath! It's a day for religious matters. **No you can't.**

But Jesus saw the woman. And he called her; and he spoke to her. And he put his hands on her. And the woman stood up straight. And she began praising God!

The religious leaders will not be deterred by the miracle. Go away. This is the Sabbath. Come back some other time. **No you can't.**

As a result of all this, people start speaking of the great and wonderful things Jesus is doing.

But Jesus, instead of speaking of the great and the wonderful, speaks of the small and the quiet. Of a mustard seed that a man planted, or a bit of leaven that a woman hid.

The Reign of God, Jesus says, is like a mustard seed that a man plants, or a bit of leaven that a woman hides. God is not like the powerful of this world, who wants to do everything with sound and might. God is like a woman who quietly hides a bit of leaven in the dough, or like a man who plants a tiny mustard seed.

The story of both the mustard seed and the bit of leaven is a story of pushing against apparently insurmountable odds and proving again and again that **yes you can!**

The seed is at home in its shell and could simply claim that the shell is too hard to break. But the seed, like Jesus before the Pharisee, says, **yes you can!**

By the grace of God, **yes you can!** And it breaks the shell, and a tiny shoot begins to grow.

The soil is packed and difficult to break, There are rocks many times larger than the tiny mustard seed. But again, **yes you can!** And by the grace of God, the fragile shoot pushes aside stones far bigger than itself, breaks through the hardened soil, and rises in the light.

The air is bright and sunny. In it fly hundreds of hungry birds, looking for a tiny shoot to devour. There is much to fear in this wide world with its high clouds, its burning sun, its hungry birds. But the small mustard seed is not intimidated; instead it says: **Yes you can!** By the grace of God, **yes you can!** And it casts aside its fear, turns green again, puts out leaves and branches and grows into a leafy tree.

Why does Jesus tell this parable? Because there, in that synagogue, God has shown that, although often quiet, God's power is greater than the most ancient traditions and the most powerful demons.

Remember that he who speaks thus not only showed the Pharisee that "**yes you can**" heal on a sabbath, but was also born, a small and poor mustard seed, in a humble manger. That as a child he was exiled in Egypt. That upon returning, he lived as an alien in Nazareth. That he eventually challenged the greatest powers of evil. And that when finally evil seemed to have conquered at the cross, God uttered the "**yes you can**" of all the ages, raising him from among the dead.

That is why today, like a small mustard seed, we dare say, "**yes you can**" Not because we are brave, or firm, or powerful. But because God raised Jesus Christ from among the dead.

That, and only that, is the reason why, no matter what the powers of evil might be, no matter what the powers of oppression, in the direst of circumstances, in life and in death, all through

the ages this strange people who call themselves Christians have dared and continue daring to say, **Yes you can! Yes you can!**

Years have passed, and the confrontation that took place that sabbath in that synagogue continues to this day, not in the synagogue, but in many other places.

Perhaps we go to city hall to ask for shelter for the homeless, where we are told, “**No you can’t!** The budget will not allow it” Or perhaps even in church, when we speak of a response to the crying needs of people around us, we are told that the Book of Order does not allow it. Or perhaps when we don't want to do something, we tell ourselves that we do not have the resources. **No you can’t!**

The biblical story shows us how to respond to all those “**no you can’t**” Jesus told his audience: “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to water?” Which of you in city hall, if your roof leaks or your furnace won't heat, doesn't find money to repair them? Which of you church leaders, if you really want something to happen, can't find a way to do it in accordance with the Book of Order? Which of us, if we really want to do something, give up before we even try to assemble all our resources?

All around us there are voices saying ¡no se puede! We can't shelter the homeless. We can't feed the hungry. We can't find a way to educate our minorities.

All around us the population is changing. We realize that this says something about our mission. And yet, it is all too easy to throw up our hands in surrender and say, “**no you can’t!**”

But if the church is to be the church of Jesus Christ; the church of the One who rose from the dead; the church must be a people of God’s, **yes you can!**

The task will be difficult. The opposition may appear overwhelming. But the mustard seed will grow, no matter whether the birds of the air wish it or not. And it will branch out, and leaf out, and bloom.

And the time may well come for the point that we often forget, at the end of the parable. When the birds that once sought to destroy the tiny shoot of mustard will come to our tree seeking shelter from wind and rain. When those who earlier cried – “**no you can’t**” – will come seeking shelter in our tree of faith. They will come seeking a place to build their nests. And our tree, opening its branches; will say, **Yes you can!**