

Big & Small

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 23, 2015
Text: Mark 4:30-32

One of my all-time favorite books is actually a Little Golden Book. Those of you with any familiarity with children's literature will know that Little Golden Books are the little story books you can buy in places like the grocery store or Target or CVS that have shiny gold spines. Often beautifully illustrated classic folk tales, no one knows how these stories came to be. They are all wonderful, but my absolute favorite for my entire life is *The Little Red Hen*. Are any of you familiar with this story?

For those of you who aren't, allow me to recap the basic plot line. A little red hen finds a grain of wheat and, very excited, she decides to plant it and grow her own wheat. Anxious to share her unexpected gift of wheat seeds, she goes to all her barnyard friends and asks them if they would like to help her plant the seed. She goes to the duck, the goose, the cat, and the pig but they all say no to her request. They are too busy or too tired. So, the hen plants the wheat seed by herself.

She carefully tends the growing seed which sprouts and grows strong and tall. When she realizes it will soon be harvest time, she goes back to her friends and asks, "who will help me harvest the wheat?" Once again her friends – the duck, the goose,

the cat and the pig all answer the same – “Not I!” So the little red hen harvests the wheat all by herself. After it was harvested, she needed to get it to the mill to be ground into flour so once again she turned to her friends. “Who will help me carry the wheat to the mill?” she asks and once again they all say, “Not I!” So, she does it herself, returning to her home with the flour.

And again she asks her friends, “who will help me make the flour into dough for bread?” I always think by this time she would have figured out they weren’t going to help but she keeps giving them second chances over and over again. But once again her friends say, “Not I!” So she does it herself. Soon the dough was ready to bake and *again* she asks her friends, “who will help me bake the bread?” Now honestly, it’s in the pan already so how they could help her any more is really moot so I think she’s just playing with them. Anyhow, not surprisingly, no one wants to help bake the bread either so she slides it into the oven herself. Soon her kitchen is filled with the wonderful smell of baking bread. When it’s done, she takes it from the oven and places it on the windowsill to cool so those wonderful smells waft over the whole barnyard. Soon all her friends were standing outside her little house. “Now who will help me eat the bread?” she asks. And, not surprisingly, now they all answer, “I will!” But she says, “Oh no you won’t! I’ll eat it myself.” And she did.

I just love this story! It gets right to the heart of so much of life, doesn't it? Tell me, what do you hear in this story? [*pause for responses*] There are many, for sure. I have done retreats based on this story for folks who need to work on giving up the need to control things, folks who are hesitant to ask for help because they expect to hear "no" so they never give folks the chance to say "no." They have allowed themselves to give up the hope of help on things which is the exact opposite of the Little Red Hen. She never gives up hope that her friends will be willing to help her. But, she also recognizes her responsibility to let them know the consequences of not helping when they could have. She does this when she doesn't share the bread which resulted from the tiny seed of wheat she found unexpectedly.

This classic story of interdependence and our failure to recognize it sometimes reminds me of one of Jesus' stories – the one we read this morning from the Gospel of Mark. The parable of the mustard seed is a familiar one, for sure. I remember this story as a foundational one from my Sunday School days and I bet a lot of you do too. Anyone here have a mustard seed necklace? [*pause for show of hands*] Me too! But just what exactly is the point of this story of Jesus. He says it's a way of describing the kingdom of God but what does that mean? To unpack it a little we first need to know a little about mustard seeds in ancient Palestine.

We know Jesus always used story subjects for the parables which would be instantly recognizable to the people standing in front of him and this is the case once again with the mustard seed. It was common practice to use mustard seeds as a point of comparison to emphasize smallness. But, as Jesus pointed out, these tiny seeds would grow into large shrubs, almost tree size – the size of a horse and rider, in fact. Also, birds were known to love mustard bushes because they loved to feast on the seeds. This meant that mustard bushes were often home to large flocks of birds. So, when Jesus told this parable to illustrate the kingdom of God, he was telling the people that God’s realm would grow from the tiniest seeds of faith and hope – them.

Now this is where I see Jesus’ story connecting directly with the Little Red Hen. How? Think about it. The Little Red Hen knows that if this seed is to become a loaf of bread, it will take a lot of work and effort. The same is true with the church – any church, not just ours. There’s always work to be done, money to be raised, events to be supported. It is, quite literally, never ending. But that’s a good thing because if it ever does end, it will be because the church is dead from neglect.

Back to the Little Red Hen. She knows the seed has to be planted, cultivated, harvested, milled, worked into dough and then baked before anyone can enjoy the bread. A lot of work for one little chicken. So, at every step of the way she stops and asks

for help from her friends in the barnyard around her. And every time they say no. They are too busy, they are too tired, whatever. Anyone who's ever served on the Nominating Committee in any church can tell you stories about how often they have similar conversations with folks. You can see in the illustrations in the book that they're doing all sorts of things – fishing, playing the flute, pretending to have a sword fight. All of it seems to be important to them in the moment, but is it more important than helping a friend? Apparently. Interestingly, the story never says how the Little Red Hen feels when her friends continually refuse to help her. At least until the end. But then, after continually refusing to help, her unhelpful friends realize they want to enjoy eating the bread the Little Red Hen has worked so hard to bake. And she says no.

Now this is where the comparison to the church breaks down, at least a little. No one in the church would refuse to feed someone just because they hadn't helped do the work of making the food. At least I hope not. But, then again, I've seen it happen. One church where I served there was a near homeless woman with two kids, always shabbily dressed and always showing up whenever the church had any sort of meal. Potluck, pay for tickets, whatever, they always showed up, expecting to eat. This went on for years, literally. At first, the people in the church were kind and gracious, encouraging the obviously down on their luck

family to join the meal. But, as time wore on and these people kept coming back and back, rarely offering to help but always ready to eat their fill and then some, people started getting cranky and grumpy about it. They felt like they were being used, taken advantage of. It just wasn't right that these people felt entitled to eat when they didn't do anything to help. They didn't *deserve* to eat. Ooops! That right there is a Jesus moment. Would Jesus ever say someone didn't deserve to eat? When the 5000 ate all those miraculous loaves and fishes, did Jesus stop and do a needs test? Did he go around asking people if they were working, if they had money to buy food for themselves? Nope, he just fed them. Jesus was no Little Red Hen.

That being said, the Little Red Hen has it right in one very important way. It takes a lot of sore hands and aching feet, a lot of tired backs and parched throats, to go from wheat seeds to bread. And in the church it does too. The church's ministries do not happen without a lot of people doing a lot of different things. Serving on boards and committees is only part of it. Financial support of the budget and the Capital Campaign is only part of it. Coming to worship on a regular basis is only part of it. Telling your family and friends who aren't here how important your church is to you and inviting them to come along with you, is only part of it – a vital piece to be sure. But only one piece. The simple truth is that the church is made up of lots of little seeds of faith, of

hope, of love – all of it grounded in and growing out of God’s amazing incredible and boundless for us. The simple truth is that God expects us, needs us to make God’s gift of love known to everyone we can. The simple truth is that we in the church can only do this if everyone in the church pitches in to do their part in making the promises of God visible to the community outside our doors. The simple truth is that no one can do everything but everyone can do something. Everyone – no matter your age or your health or your income bracket – no matter how busy you are or how bored you are – everyone can do something. Everyone can be the seed God needs us to be in the world around us each day.

Friends, the truth is that we are, each one of us, God’s very own seeds of hope, of love, of possibility in the world each day. And I know there are days – sometimes too many of them – when that feels like impossible burden or even falsehood. I know there are days when the last thing you want to think about is one more thing to do, at the church or anywhere else. I know there are days when you feel you can’t do one more thing because you’re too old or too young or too financially strapped or too overwhelmed by your own life. I know this because I have those days too. But I’ll tell you the secret I’ve learned to live my life by. It is precisely those overwhelming days when you feel like life is going to crush you – it is precisely those days, those moments, when God is closest to you – ready to lift you up, embrace you in those

everlasting arms of love and well-being. It is precisely those days, those moments, when reaching outside of yourself to someone else, something else, is how you let go of your worries and fears and reconnect with God. That's because it is those moments of doing something outside of yourself when you make it possible for God to cultivate that seed of love and hope God placed inside you long before you were even born, that small seed with possibilities big enough to change the world, if only you let it. If only we work together to make it happen for you and everyone else. That is the purpose of the church, this church and every other one. Small seeds of people themselves holding God's seeds of love, hope, faith and trust make a big difference anytime we make the effort to cultivate and nurture them. Big difference from small seed when we all come together in God's love. Jesus knew this was true. The Little Red Hen knew this was true. How about you? Amen.