

The Gamechanger
By Jason Huff
Psalm 145:1-13, James 2:1-13, Luke 13:10-21

This morning's final Scripture reading is from Luke 13:10-21. Listen now to God's Word. "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 ruler 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 his 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. 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 of the air 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 a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.""

Babe Ruth. Tiger Woods. Lance Armstrong. Michael Jordan. Even if you've never watched a sporting event in your life, you know these names. Literally, they redefined their sports. They may not be the best players ever, but they changed their games. Game changers exist outside of sports, too. In science: Galileo, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking. In politics: Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Mohatma Gandhi. In issues of religion: Moses, Mohammed, Siddhartha, Confucius. We may not like them, we may disagree with them, we might even think they've done more harm than good. But either way, game changers make a lasting impact.

A lot of gamechangers have less than pristine backgrounds. Michael Jordan didn't make the varsity basketball team when he first tried out. Winston Churchill was a poor student. Moses killed a man, then fled the country before he could be punished. And yet they overcame their inauspicious starts. But becoming a gamechanger doesn't happen overnight. An athlete gets better practice after practice, game after game. Scientists may have grand theories, but it takes work to back them up with facts. Some people are born with great talents, but those talents mean little until they're used day after day.

Of course, all of these folks pale in comparison to what Jesus accomplished and still accomplishes. From a secular perspective, there's no doubt that Jesus radically changed the world we live in. References to Christ are all over Western culture. People who have little clue about the Bible or faith use biblical allusions and phrases without even knowing it. His ethical and moral teachings have shaped society. This influence is undeniable; even those who dismiss Him still have to recognize His effect on humanity. This man, born in a place of no account, who lived and died in a tiny corner of the Roman Empire, was a gamechanger.

But for those of us who are believers, Jesus changes not just society but our own hearts. He opens the door to eternal life – a door that without Him is permanently closed. He makes it possible for us to know God in a personal way, not just as some impersonal deity but as our own Father. And what’s more, Christ is still alive! His resurrection is another gamechanger. It gives us hope that we, too, will be resurrected someday into God’s eternal Kingdom. We expect that God will raise us in our bodies, made perfect and whole and holy, with hearts wiped completely clean from sin and death. That radically affects how we look at life. But the Kingdom of God comes in subtle ways. We miss much of what God is doing all around us because it happens in small and seemingly insignificant steps. That’s what we see in today’s passage.

In today’s story, there’s a woman oppressed by a spirit for 18 years. It’s caused a physical condition where she can’t even stand up straight. She comes to the synagogue one day when Jesus was teaching. When He sees her, His heart goes out to her, He calls Her forward, and He heals her. Now the synagogue leader gets mad because Jesus has healed somebody on the Sabbath, even though the law didn’t prohibit it. But the guy’s a coward, so instead of confronting Jesus about it, he berates the woman! He says, “Come and be healed some other day.” But the woman didn’t ask to be healed – Jesus called her up from the crowd! He’s decided all on His own to heal her on the Sabbath.

Jesus does it because His whole purpose on earth is to release people from spiritual bondage. If it’s OK to unbind an animal on the Sabbath to let it get a drink of water, it’s even more OK for a child of God to be freed from her chains of suffering and oppression on a Sabbath! This is the very nature of Jesus’ mission. Wherever God’s Kingdom goes, slaves are set free and captives released from their shackles. Through faith in Him, we are set free from sin and death. We’re given new life...eternal life! Those things we are in bondage to are destroyed and the prison door swings wide open. This woman’s healing is a foretaste of the freedom that Jesus brings for all who might believe in Him.

The synagogue ruler implies that after eighteen years of suffering, one more day of waiting didn’t matter. And in her society, the woman who was healed didn’t matter. She was a nothing, a nobody. Her story isn’t different from the others we’ve studied in the gospel of Luke. John 21:25 tells us that Jesus did tons of stuff that wasn’t recorded. People set free from addictions and sins and illnesses and troubles...untold numbers of them never made the pages of any book. Their names and histories are forgotten. Insignificant, as far as we’re concerned.

But all those people mattered to God, and all of us matter to God still now. The two parables that Jesus tells the crowd prove it. As Jesus puts it, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all the seeds known in Palestine of His day. It’s like a pinch of leaven in a hundred pounds of flour. And yet, that insignificant thing, that little seed, that little leaven, creates something huge in comparison. The seed makes a tree big enough to house the birds. The entire batch of dough rises because that pinch of yeast has permeated every part of it.

In the same way, the Kingdom of God takes root here and there, in this person and that person, in this family and that one, in a healing here and a miracle there and someone coming to faith out there somewhere. Nobody notices at first. It happens a person at a time. But like that mustard seed, it pushes out its roots, growing into something so much bigger than the little seed that was planted. Like the yeast in the dough, the Kingdom starts spreading everywhere. It only takes a witness here, a new disciple there, until everyone around is affected. Salvation starts setting down roots and hope starts springing up where there was nothing but hardened soil.

So what can we take home today from this passage? I've got three thoughts that are all tied together and interrelated. First, *in the Kingdom of God, everyone is significant*. Second, *in the Kingdom of God, you are significant*. And third, *everything you do as part of the Kingdom of God is significant*.

So let's tackle them in order. *In the Kingdom of God, everyone is significant*. As a professor of mine once said, Jesus was always concerned about "the least, the last, and the lost." He made enemies with the religious establishment because He taught that everyone was important to God. He hung around with tax collectors, adulterers, sinners, the street people, the bums...everybody. No one was too far gone for the Kingdom of God to come to them. 1 Timothy 2:3-4 tells us that God desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. We have meaning and purpose with God.

This goes against our celebrity culture that says you're only as important as your last film or your last album or your looks or whatever. In the Kingdom of God, people are significant because they are created in God's image. The American ideal that says that hard work is the key to success. In the Kingdom of God, the unsuccessful, the losers, the ones whose dreams never came true, they count too. The guilty and the innocent, the guy with the Mazarati and the guy who walks to work, the famous and the fameless, all of us are important to the Kingdom of God.

We have permanent significance. In fact, we have enough significance that Jesus Christ suffered all the pains and hardships of living a human life just to be with us. Even though he was the only truly innocent man ever to walk the earth, he died a horrible death so that we could join Him eternally, freed from the bondage of sin that separates us from God. That's just how important we are to God. And when a person truly accepts the free gift of eternal life through faith, it changes the game forever. It changes their past and their future. It includes them in the Kingdom of God for all eternity.

Because of that, we have to make it personal. *In the Kingdom of God, you are significant*. **You** matter. Now to some of us, that seems like an obvious statement. If everyone is significant in the Kingdom of God, then individuals are important. But most of us don't really apply it to ourselves. It's because one of the chains that God's enemy has put on us is the chain of inferiority. The people who are the arrogant and conceited are usually the ones who have the biggest fears about their own inferiority. They're using their self-pride as a smokescreen. And our culture makes it worse. Our culture has tons of self-help books that try to teach us how to feel better about ourselves. But if our value and self-worth come from being made in the image of God, it's only by turning to God that we're going to find them. Everything else is eventually going to fall apart and make us feel all that more unimportant.

I think that all of us feel insignificant. We try to do things to prove our worth, but they don't work. We can grow up in a loving, secure, safe household free of divorce or lots of tension and still feel this way. For me, grades were the way that I tried to prove my value. I got embarrassed every time I got a A-, let alone a B. It proved to me that I wasn't perfect, that I wasn't that significant. And you know what? It's not true. I got the best GPA of my life in seminary. Now I know what you're thinking...Pastor Jason, you're just bragging now. But the truth is, nobody really cared. I had a piece of paper that said I had a Masters of Divinity degree and another that said I'd passed the exams for ordination. It didn't matter how well or how badly I did! What I'd heard all along was true...C equals a degree! But when you base your worth on something outside of God's love for you, it's never going to measure up. And if that's true for those of us who grew up in good homes, I don't even want to think how hard it is for those who grew up in households that weren't so good, where being belittled was part of growing up.

But God says **you** matter. Not your grades, not your pay scale, not your ability to play guitar or sing in the choir or manage a committee or teach Sunday school. You matter because you were made by Him. It doesn't matter what your mom said or your dad said or your cousin or your classmates or anybody else. You are important because God says so. It's one of the simplest things in the world, but so hard to remember. Karl Barth wrote tons of material in the first half of the 20th century on the faith, some of the deepest and most profound theological work anybody's ever done. When he was asked to summarize His life's work, he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Jesus loves you. Not just good people, not just the pastor up front, not just the little children. God knows you by name and loves you. You! God loves you! Never forget it. When you embrace it and believe it, when you accept God's love through faith and repentance, not only do you matter, you become a gamechanger too.

Last but not least, *everything you do as part of the Kingdom of God is significant*. We live in a world with news and radio and everything telling us about events around the entire world. We get the sense that we are powerless to do anything about it. It's all too big, too far away, too impossible to change. We live right next to a city that has been stripped of its own image, where poverty and violence reign on streets with row after row of condemned houses that were once part of thriving neighborhoods. How can we change the world when we can't even make a dent on the metropolis just outside our walls?

But if you matter and everyone matters in the Kingdom of God, then no matter how little the things we do for the Kingdom may seem, they will make a difference. They will change somebody's life. Only God knows how; we may never see it. But somehow, things will be not the same. We just have to get out of the way of seeing things with earthly eyes and earthly concepts of importance. You know, as a pastor, it's easy to fall into the trap of wanting to be noticed. I still check the attendance records each week to see if we've got more people coming. I want the church to grow. And we should grow – because God has called us to minister to people and to make them into Christ's disciples, and growth can tell us if we're really fulfilling our call to reach out to those we can touch with the gospel. But there are times when I think, "Boy, it'd be nice if had 100 people in here, or 200 or 500 or 1,000." Sometimes that's because I want the Word of God to grow through us and reach our neighbors and their neighbors. But other times, it's because I want to be seen as important. I want to be seen as successful.

But God doesn't count that. God wants us to be faithful with whatever He gives us. All of it counts. Every last thing we do for His Kingdom matters. If Church of the Covenant reaches 70 people or 700, so what? That's God's thing, not ours! We are not significant because of the amount of ministry we do. All of it, whether it's five people in a Bible study or eight in a new member class or whatever, it matters! Whether we get 20 or 120 people ordering Angel Food boxes, we have the chance with each and every box to share the love of Christ with someone! You know, I have no ability to change the world. I don't have the ability to change other people. I barely have the ability to change myself. But I know the One who can, and I know that through Him, this world can be different.

As we close this morning, I want to share with you a promotional video for the program we're going to be doing through the Christmas season. It's going to be something we do for four weeks, each Sunday night from 5pm-7pm or so. It's called the Advent Conspiracy, and it gets right to the heart of the significance of the things we can do in the name of the Kingdom. Take a look. [play video] I hope you'll be a part of that, because together we're going to see just what a difference we can make in some lives by coming together with others and saying, "We can make a difference through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Because the truth is, Jesus is our gamechanger. Our eternities are different once we have an encounter with Jesus and accept His free gift. In His Kingdom, we have purpose, every last one of us, and we can make an eternal difference. We've been loosed from our chains and set free from sin, and now we're a part of that mustard seed growing into a tree. Let's embrace our place in God's Kingdom today.