

## THE TREE OF LIFE

When my older brother Josh got tired of working in the emergency room, as he had for several years during the first part of his career as a nurse, he took a job in the neonatal intensive care unit...

Since I was in high school at the time, I didn't really pay much attention to what it was he actually did in the NICU, that is, until a few years later when his first daughter was born premature. When I went to visit my new niece in the hospital, I remember having to scrub my hands and arms for several minutes like a surgeon, before being buzzed into a room filled with tiny babies in incubators, and a stop light connected to some sort of sound meter to indicate when it was too loud.

This was the place where my niece was, but it was also the place my brother worked, taking care of the sickest of the sick, and the tiniest of the tiny.

And maybe more than anything, I remember the motto of one of the doctors who worked there with him: "the best cure for being small, is getting big."

While my wife and I are blessed with big babies, all three of my brother's daughters spent some amount of time in the NICU, their middle daughter having been born at 27 weeks. She's seven years old now, still small for her age, but brilliant and compassionate and amazing.

But I'd be lying if I said she didn't occasionally get upset that her five year old sister and three year old cousin can just about trade clothes with her.

There are advantages to being big. Things like not having to ask help to reach things high up on the shelf. For businesses, being big often means greater efficiency, and lower costs. As I set out on the task of buying cases of bottled water and Gatorade for first responders earlier this week, it was no surprise that I found the best prices at BIG stores like Sam's Club and Walmart.

But being big isn't all it's cracked up to be. Take Robert Wadlow, for example, Guinness World Records gave him the title of tallest man ever, measuring in at 8ft 11inches. But his height was the result of a pituitary issue that caused other medical problems, his body could not support itself. When he died in 1940, it was the result of a septic infection, stemming from a sore, that was caused by the braces he used to walk. Being big, is more or less what killed him.

Being big can cause issues. It can cause you to lose sight of what really matters. It can cause you to think that big is good, and small is bad; even though in our hearts, we know that's not the truth.

Consider the story of Jesus' birth. God didn't enter into human form as a strong and powerful king leading the largest nation in the world. NO, God became human through a newborn baby, born to young unwed parents, in a place set aside for animals, in the middle of a small backwoods town. Jesus' birth was small, without a lot of fanfare or flourish, but the event that it represented, God incarnate in man, was impossibly huge.

Small things aren't always as small as they look. Sometimes they're bigger on the inside. Like the Tardis, or, you know a mustard seed. The tiniest of seeds that grows into the largest of trees.

Jesus is speaking in parables. In fact, the Gospel of Mark tells us at the end of today's reading that parables were the ONLY way he taught at this point in time, and that he would only explain them to the disciples in private after the fact. Maybe he's feeling a bit more reserved after being chastised like we heard in last week's Gospel.

But the why isn't as important as the what... All of these parables without direct explanations means that we as modern-day disciples need to do a bit more of our own pondering to determine just what Jesus is saying to the church.

And in my pondering, I truly think that Jesus is extolling the virtue of smallness.

His inner circle was small, and the disciples themselves were the sorts of people that might be considered small, too: laborers, fishermen, tax collectors. They weren't members of high society. He hand-picked his small crew of small men and built from there.

Several times in my life, I've worked with organizations that have forgotten what it's like to be small, and they begin to struggle. They're weighed down by the memory of being big and can't move forward. But when they focus back on being small, on starting from scratch, on doing things the way they would if they were a fraction of the size, they begin to gain momentum, and things begin moving forward again.

Sometimes in life, and in the church, we can become too big for our own britches, in our Old Testament reading, we get the impression that may be part of the issue with Saul, he's overzealous, and the people who wanted him appointed as king had lost sight of the most important things, they had asked to go against God's will for them, they had lost their unity and their vision.

I think these parables of Jesus are an important instruction for us to avoid a similar fate... Don't undervalue the importance of things that are small: everything has to start somewhere, and extraordinary growth can take place in such a small amount of time.

The best cure for being small is getting big, but you HAVE to be small in order to grow. That's just common sense.

Here at Mt. Calvary/Benscreek, we've been blessed in many ways with some amount of bigness, but in so many ways, we are also small. There is still so much potential for growth, for new starts, and that's exactly what we are, every single day.

We are sowing seed, hoping to find new growth, but at the same time, we are the soil that seed has been planted in, it's our job to nurture it, to help it bear fruit.

When we think small, we can re-find the same sort of values and mission that Jesus gave to the first disciples, and which have been passed down to us. This parable reminds us that it is not the size that is important but what comes from it. It is not the size of the seed that is important, but what counts – in God's eyes – is the quality of God's love that we can spread among each other and into the wider community. Amen.