

It matters
Matthew 13:31-32
May 11, 2008

Earlier this week, I heard an installment of the *This I Believe* series on National Public Radio. The guest essayist was Sara Miles, a writer living in San Francisco, and a woman raised as and long confirmed as an atheist. Here is her story ...

Until recently, I thought being a Christian was all about belief. I didn't know any Christians, but I considered them people who believed in the virgin birth, for example, the way I believed in photosynthesis or germs.

But then, in an experience I still can't logically explain, I walked into a church and a stranger handed me a chunk of bread. Suddenly, I knew that it was made out of real flour and water and yeast — yet I also knew that God, named Jesus, was alive and in my mouth.

That first communion knocked me upside-down. Faith turned out not to be abstract at all, but material and physical. I'd thought Christianity meant angels and trinities and being good. Instead, I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.

I came to believe that God is revealed not only in bread and wine during church services, but whenever we share food with others — particularly strangers. I came to believe that the fruits of creation are for everyone, without exception — not something to be doled out to insiders or the "deserving."

So, over the objections of some of my fellow parishioners, I started a food pantry right in the church sanctuary, giving away literally tons of oranges and potatoes and Cheerios around the very same altar where I'd eaten the body of Christ. We gave food to anyone who showed up. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters, bishops — all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people.

At the pantry, serving over 500 strangers a week, I confronted the same issues that had kept me from religion in the first place. Like church, the food pantry asked me to leave certainty behind, tangled me up with people I didn't particularly want to know and scared me with its demand for more faith than I was ready to give.

Because my new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays and declaring myself "saved," I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's Magnum and then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church.

But I learned that hunger can lead to more life — that by sharing real food, I'd find communion with the most unlikely people; that by eating a piece of bread, I'd experience myself as part of one body. This I believe: that by opening ourselves to strangers, we will taste God.

A man takes a chunk of bread and offers it to a stranger. It is just a small morsel of bread. It is the simplest of gestures, but when it is tasted its power to transform is astonishing. It grows in her and it grows on her and feeds not only her, but thousands and thousands of other hungry people.

It's Jesus' parable, isn't it? Just told with different words in a different context? The communion bread is the mustard seed, and Sara's life is the tree into which it grows, providing shelter and sustenance for all sorts of God's creatures!

A man takes a mustard seed and sows it in his field ...

A man. Any man. Any one. Any one of you. Any one of you takes a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, and sows it. And that act -- the smallest act, the simplest gesture, the act of kindness or generosity or sympathy or compassion or support that you thought was so unimportant, so insignificant -- matters.

It matters! In the kingdom of God, it matters! In the kingdom of God, generosity and faith and glory are accounted differently. Consider the value Jesus assigns to the widow's offering of two pennies. Consider the praise Jesus gives for the faith of the Canaanite woman, willing to humiliate herself and beg for the leftovers of Jesus' attention for the sake of her daughter. Consider the glory Jesus attributes to the flowers of the wild grasslands.

You take a mustard seed and you sow it. It's an act of faith, because you know you cannot control what happens to the seed once you plant it in the ground, but you do it because you've seen the results before. Just like it's an act of faith to offer help to a stranger or a kind word to an estranged family member or an apology to a rival. You don't know how they'll react or what they'll do with it. But you do it. You do it because it's what you can do. You give it because it's what you have to give.

And what you can do -- whatever it is -- and what you have to give -- whatever it is -- matters! In the kingdom of God it matters! Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like this ... It is the smallest of seeds, but when it grows up ..." And does it grow up! That smallest of seeds becomes the largest of plants. The smallest act, the simplest gesture, may have -- will have! -- an effect far broader and deeper than we could ever anticipate or imagine.

Who could have guessed that Sara Miles would start a food pantry, a food pantry giving away literally tons of food every week? Who could have guessed she would start it in a church? Who could have guessed she'd even be in a church? That piece of bread, that mustard seed, transformed her life and the lives of countless other people in a way none of them could have anticipated.

It becomes a tree, and birds come and make their nests in its branches ...

The landowner didn't plant the seed with birds in mind, but they are blessed by his act. The priest didn't offer the bread with the street people of San Francisco in mind, but they are blessed by his act. What you do for Jesus' sake, what you do for the sake of the kingdom of God, has far-reaching consequences and blesses many, many people far beyond what you intend. It matters!

Let me tell you another story ...

George was the youngest of four siblings, younger by fifteen years than the next youngest. None of them ever finished college. None of them ever started college, except George.

George went to college. He attended a large midwestern university, not just because he wanted to make something of himself, but because he wanted to know. He wanted to know about life. He wanted to know about its meaning and its purpose. He wanted to know about God. He wanted to know if there was a God. He was an unbeliever, raised in a family of unbelievers, but he wanted to know. Maybe that's why he majored in philosophy!

One day George visited a minister and asked him some of his questions. The minister said to George: "Why don't you go home and read the gospel of John and then come back and tell me what you think about it?" It was a seed, a mustard seed, the simplest of gestures. "Read it and see what you think ..."

I don't know if George ever went back to talk with that minister again, but he did read the gospel of John, and it changed him. It changed his life forever. He became a Christian, a devoted follower of Jesus, and he sought out Christian friends from among his fellow university students and became involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on campus.

After graduation he went to seminary on the west coast, a half a country away, and met and married a fine and talented young Christian woman there. He was ordained and went to work for InterVarsity on the east coast -- a whole country away! -- helping countless students on college campuses in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and New York and Delaware and Maryland struggle with the same questions he had struggled with.

But still he wanted to know and now he wanted to find ways to go deeper in helping people make a good life, make a joyful life, even in the face of life's myriad difficulties. So he went back to school, earned a PhD, and began a new counseling ministry that would occupy the rest of his life and took a job as a seminary professor training ministers to be sensitive counselors, pastors who would be equipped to offer grace as well as preach it.

A man once took a mustard seed, told George to read a gospel ... and look who was blessed by it! Countless college and seminary students whom he taught. Countless ministers and therapists whom he supervised. Countless missionary and military families in Africa and Europe and the Far East with whom he held retreats and offered counseling sessions. Countless clients whose lives were held together or put back together because of his wise and caring counsel, or, better, because of his readiness to pass on the grace he had himself had received.

Countless people all around this country and all over the world ... and me, because George was my father! My life, my faith, my ministry, because of my father ... and all because of a mustard seed!

I want to share with you one more detail from my father's story, from his college days. He hung out in college with a group of close friends who liked to party. They tried and tried and tried to get him to drink with them, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't drink with them, but neither would he give them up as friends, so it was George, my dad, who was the permanent designated driver, always taking his friends wherever they needed to go!

And that was the pattern for the rest of his life. My father was a man of integrity and deep faith, standing by his values and openly living his faith, but his values and his faith never drove a wedge between him and other people, no matter who they were! His values and his faith led him to open his arms wide and offer a warm embrace to all kinds of different people in all kinds of different circumstances. He lived our maxim: *No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome ...*

Like Sara Miles did. Like the faith Sara Miles discovered. A faith that doesn't divide, but unites. A faith that doesn't take you out of life but thrusts you into it. A faith that blesses the friends and strangers around you as you allow yourself to be blessed. A faith that matters!