

In our 21st century American society, we often think that bigger is better. The athletes we prize most are the big guys who play football and basketball.

Economically, we often equate peoples' value with their salaries, the bigger their bank accounts, the more important they are. In retail, the big chain stores are where people tend to shop, and mom and pop stores are becoming rarer and rarer.

In politics, we very rarely have short leaders. During my lifetime, 7 of the 10 presidents have been over 6 feet tall. And the remaining 3, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush, were all still taller than the national average for men today. In fact the last time we had a president that was of below average height was Benjamin Harrison in 1888.

And we usually don't even pay attention to smaller countries. We worry about India and Russia and China. But when's the last time you saw Belgium or Portugal or Guyana on the news? These countries are too small to normally show up on our journalistic radar screens, unless they're the site of some unfortunate disaster. We certainly don't concern ourselves much with them otherwise. For Americans, bigger is better.

In the Biblical world, people also thought that bigger is better. And the biggest thing in their world were the famous Cedars of Lebanon. Even today, the Cedars of Lebanon are the biggest trees in the region. The modern Lebanese flag still has a cedar tree pictured on it.

Today in our world, we know that the redwoods and sequoias in California, and certain tree species in Tasmania and New Zealand, are bigger and taller than the cedars of Lebanon. But in the Biblical world, North America and Australia were completely off the radar screen. The biggest thing in their world was the Cedars of Lebanon.

Solomon was the most powerful and richest king in the history of the Jewish people. And when he was assembling building materials both for his palace and for God's temple, he obtained cedar from Lebanon. Only the biggest and the best would do for these building projects.

And when they rebuilt the temple after the exile, they used, you guessed it, cedar from Lebanon.

But the Cedars of Lebanon are more than just a source of lumber. They are also used symbolically in the Old Testament.

There's a story where one king is asking a favor of another king. He replies basically, 'That's like a small thorn bush asking a favor of a Cedar of Lebanon right before the thorn bush gets trampled down by a roaming animal.' In other words, I'm mighty, you're a pipsqueak--don't ask me for favors.

Our Old Testament lesson today is from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel uses the Cedar of Lebanon several times in his prophecies. And every time, it refers to a strong nation or empire

or city-state that thinks it's powerful and of high status, but is brought crashing down. Giant cedars appear to be impressive. But they can be brought low.

And that was an important message to the Jewish people. They were a small nation living in the midst of 3 large and powerful empires. The only real geo-political importance Israel had was that it occupied a strategic location as a land bridge between these great and powerful empires. Consequently, Israel's history is one of being conquered by her more powerful neighbors over and over and over again. Israel lived almost constantly with the stress of having powerful neighbors threatening her borders.

Yet, today in our OT reading, God offers a message of hope through the prophet Ezekiel.

God says that he will take a little sprig, a little clipping off the top of a cedar in Lebanon, and bring it south and plant it on a mountain in Israel.

But this little sprig, this little sprout, God promises, will grow and flourish. It will eventually grow into a tree itself, a tree which will provide shelter in its branches for every sort of bird.

And through God's actions, the low little tree will be nurtured and will be exalted, while the big tree will be brought low.

'Bigger is better' is usually not the message of the Scripture. God doesn't have a track record of choosing the biggest and the best. Instead, in scripture, God over and over again chooses the small, the weak, the insignificant.

By human standards, we would think in Biblical history that God should have chosen a big empire to make splash in the world. He had lots to choose from: the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persian, the Greeks, the Romans, all of these empires towered in power. And yet God chose little Israel to be his people.

God sees things differently. God knows that worldly power is temporary. Everything eventually dies: trees, people, and nations. There is no place for pride because of human or earthly power or stature.

And Jesus makes the same point in today's Gospel. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God in terms of a plant. But instead of comparing it to a mighty Cedar of Lebanon, Jesus says, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth." There is nothing powerful or glorious about a mustard seed. It is so small that it could get stuck between your teeth. And yet, such a small seed yields big results. "When it is sown," Jesus says, "it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Over and over again God does not choose the powerful, the large, or the mighty. God chooses a weak people, the people of Israel, a people initially without wealth or even land, to be

his chosen people. God chooses Moses who is a lousy speaker to stand before Pharaoh. God chooses David, the youngest and weakest of Jesse's sons to become the King. God chooses to be incarnate and to be born to peasant parents and to be cradled in a cow trough. God chooses to die the death of a convicted criminal nailed to the hard wood of the cross.

God chooses what the world regards as small and insignificant in order to show his power. God chooses what the world regards as foolishness to show his wisdom. God chooses what the world regards as weak to show his strength.

Bigger is not necessarily better. When you're big, pride can get in the way. God often calls the small, the weak, the insignificant to do his work in the world.

And this creates challenges, and it creates opportunities here at St. Paul's.

Part of that is because of our own sense of identity. We're a big church that thinks of itself as a small church.

In the Episcopal Church, we're in the top quarter of congregations when it comes to size. We're bigger than 75% of the other churches in our denomination, and smaller congregations see us as a larger church. Case in point--last Sunday I was visiting a small church in Colorado: St. David's of the Hills, near Pike's Peak. When I described St. Paul's, the members of St. David's used terms referring to us as big church, which we were in their eyes.

But peculiarly, we here at St. Paul's seem to think of ourselves as a smaller church. I think there are two reasons.

1. We've got some gigantic churches that are our neighbors down the street. We are much smaller than they are.

And 2., we remember a time when we were larger. There are periods in our history when we were larger than we are now. And we, like most other Christian congregations in this country are in a period when our numbers are getting smaller. In fact, the average congregation in the US is shrinking at a rate of 9% a year, which is a MUCH steeper decline than we've experienced.

So are we smaller than we used to be? Undoubtedly. But is bigger better? Not necessarily.

Over and over in scripture, if we're bigger, yet are also cocky and relying upon ourselves rather than on God, then bigger is definitely not better. It is ALWAYS spiritually far better to be smaller and trusting in God than bigger and trusting in ourselves. That is CRYSTAL clear.

So we don't want to grow just so that we can become more self-reliant and forget about trusting in God. That's a spiritual death spiral.

On the other hand, Jesus does tell us to go out and make disciples. We are called to welcome and nurture and train new followers of Jesus Christ.

That's why our mission statement says that we want to be "Welcoming and growing in faith and fellowship." We want to become a stronger Christian community, deepening our faith, and being a more supportive group to each other. And we do want to invite and welcome and incorporate new people into our faith community.

So if we want to grow in order to be more effective in worshipping the living God, in supporting one another in our journey of faith, and in serving others in God's name, then growth is a good thing.

Is bigger better? Not if it's just about being bigger for the sake of being bigger.

But if we're trying to grow in our own faithfulness, in our own relationships with God and each other, and if we're trying to welcome others into a life of worshipping God and serving his people, then we would be growing in the right ways, for the right reasons.

And God promises that even a little sprig of cedar, and even a little mustard seed can grow, if God is giving them the growth.

So above all, let's be faithful to God.