

July 27, 2008  
Sermon  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52  
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## The Kingdom

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight oh God strength and my Redeemer.

The Parables of the Kingdom are often confusing, sometimes divisive and certainly mysterious. I could take any one of these parables and preach a whole sermon about it. But for today, I would like to concentrate on only the first four parables in our scripture reading for today.

Jesus saying these parables out in the open, outside of a house, to a crowd and to his disciples, what makes this interesting is that Jesus is not preaching in the heart of the city and certainly not in the sacred precincts of the temple, the center of organized religion in his day and in his culture. He isn't talking about the holy of holies or the religious festivals or the clergy of his time.

He is not directly telling us how to live our lives. Jesus is telling stories, and he waxes poetic when he says what the kingdom of heaven is “like.” I can just imagine how confusing these parables must have sounded to the people of his time and perhaps to us today.

We may see the story of the mustard seed as a sweet story about a small seed grown into the powerful image of a tree. However, to the crowd to which Jesus spoke, it would have sounded confusing and even offensive. In order to understand this we need to have a short lesson in horticulture. The mustard tree is really not a tree at all. It is a shrub; actually it is a weed and an unruly weed at that. And as a well known horticulturist has often said, “A weed is a plant out of place.” So why would anyone sow a weed in their field? For the people of Jesus’ time there were religious problems in doing so.

You must remember that the audience of the Gospel of Matthew was composed of many Jews who did not consider themselves as beginning a new religion or identify themselves as

Christians. Richard Swanson, in his book, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*, tells us that, "Living a Jewish life means living a life that witnesses to the stable and orderly love of God in all things.

Planting a weed that was a symbol of wild disorder was judged to be an unnecessary compromise of the basic principles of Jewish life." So Jesus takes us by surprise, for a mustard seed is a humble image for something as marvelous and transforming as the reign of God.

Although we may be taken by surprise at this, the next parable describing the kingdom of heaven as, "yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened," was indeed offensive to the audience of the time. For the audience would have considered leaven unclean and corrupting. Leaven was a symbol of moral corruption. So here you have this woman using a quantity of flour, which is about 10 gallons and making enough bread to feed 100 to 150 people. In our culture where leavened bread is commonplace, we are not likely to hear the story in the same way that the audience in Jesus'

time heard it. We miss the offense, and perhaps the power of what Jesus is saying. If you consider the time in which Jesus lived, where, if you were not a Roman, you lived underneath the heel of the Roman Empire. You would have lived in a patriarchal culture, where the poor and the outcast were oppressed and women were not able to have a voice. Yet here we find Jesus using the imagery of the parables to offer an alternative to that way of life, to offer a word of hope and possibility, "For all those who are leaven in their society, this parable assures them that the kingdom of God is like them." This can lead us to ask ourselves who are the leaven in our society.

In both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast we find not the natural and expected course of things, but the supernatural and the surprising. The big tree growing from the tiny mustard seed is like those comic postcard illustrations of a farmer with a gargantuan tomato strapped to the back of a flat bed truck. In the parable of the yeast it is the voiceless woman, that one, lone woman working with that massive amount of flour who has either

lost her mind or is working for the kingdom bakery. These two parables are about hope and hope is a powerful thing. The subjects of the parables are the unwanted in society and here is Jesus using them to describe the kingdom of heaven.

The second set of parables, the Treasure and the Pearl are about the human response to what God is doing. There is urgency in these two parables of being able to act to gain access to the kingdom while it is here. "Like buried treasure, God's activity is hidden and must be discovered. Like a pearl of immense value, it must be sought in order to be found."<sup>1</sup> It would be too easy to take these two parables in a literal manner. They are not about the kingdom of heaven as an individual possession that can be earned through the renunciation of all material goods. The central message is that the kingdom is something that God is doing and something that we receive as a gift. It is not something that can be

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 157.

acquired as a legal and permanent possession<sup>2</sup> but is a state of mind into which we can enter.

So where does this leave us? Do we understand the parables any better than we started? If you said no I doubt you would be alone.

I would like to tell you a story about where we might look for the kingdom of heaven. If you have studied your American history well you might remember "Williams Jennings Bryan, a congressman from Illinois and three--time Democratic nominee for the presidency, [who] spent the last years of his life as activist in the religious movement known as fundamentalism. In 1925, at Dayton, Tennessee, William Jennings Bryan was an associate prosecutor in the trial of the school teacher John Thomas Scopes. Scopes had taught the biological theory of evolution to his students in defiance of a state law prohibiting the teaching of doctrine contrary to the Bible. The defense attorney was Clarence Darrow. Bryan won what became known as "The Monkey Trial," and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Scopes was fined \$100. But Darrow's merciless cross-examination humiliated Bryan and dealt a fierce blow to fundamentalism. Some say the trial broke the heart of William Jennings Bryan. Several days after the trial ended, Bryan died.

In the play, "Inherit the Wind," a dramatic account of the Scopes trial, the character representing Baltimore Sun reporter H.L. Mencken, when hearing of Bryan's death, says to Clarence Darrow, "Why should we weep for him? You know what he was-a Barnum-bunkum Bible-beating blowhard." To an agnostic Mencken, Darrow says of Bryan, 'A giant once lived in that body. But the man got lost - lost because he was looking for God too high up and too far away.'"<sup>3</sup>

Are we looking too high up and too far away for the kingdom? Luke tells us it can be found within us and in the gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus' sayings from the first century, Jesus says, the kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, but you do not see it. If Jesus can compare the kingdom of heaven to

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. William L. Dols, *Looking for the Kingdom of God Too High*(2002, accessed 2008); available from <http://www.day1.net>.

an ordinary mustard seed and speak of the kingdom of heaven as yeast that a common woman took and mixed with flour, if the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field and like a person in search of fine pearl then perhaps God is telling us that the kingdom of heaven is found in ordinary things. Could he be saying that much of the kingdom of heaven is here with us now, and we only have to look among the weeds to find it?

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *The Seeds of Heaven* writes about the hiddenness of the reign of God ... and what that hiddenness may teach us about our own seeking: she says, “that in the most ordinary, everyday things and experiences are signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullness of our days...[it is possible] that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places the treasure hunters would be sure to check, but in the very last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives...”

Maybe these parables are not so mysterious after all. Perhaps they call us to look at the ordinariness of our lives and at the unwanted in our society. Some scholars say that these parables are about the end time and others say they are about the present time. I believe that there is so much in these parables about the present time that gives us a window into what the kingdom of heaven is like. The kingdom of heaven is a place where all people are equal, a place where there are no outcasts, no wars, and plenty of food for everyone. It is a place where we appreciate the every day circumstances of our lives and see God's presence in the small and seemingly unimportant days of our lives. The kingdom of heaven is everywhere.

Dols, Rev. Dr. William L. *Looking for the Kingdom of God Too High* 2002, accessed 2008; Available from <http://www.day1.net>.

Hare, Douglas R. A. *Matthew Interpretation*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993.