

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Ken Hughes at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on July 30, 2023.

HOW KINGDOMS GROW

Matthew 13:31-33

I've used this analogy before in describing parables, and a few of you may have heard this, but I think it's worth repeating: If I were to say to you, "the sun is shining," you could confirm if I was speaking truthfully just by looking out the window.

But what if I said, "the sun is shining in my heart"? You would know right away that I wasn't claiming that my heart has a surface temperature of 9800 degrees Fahrenheit, like the sun. So I must mean something else, or maybe several things. "The sun is shining in my heart" is not a parable exactly, but it acts like one. Like a parable, it both reveals something and holds something back. That's why parables are defined as "sayings that do not carry their meanings on the surface, but which demand thought and perception if the hearer is to benefit from it." Or as Jesus put it, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." With that in mind, we turn to the parable appointed for today, from Matthew 13:31-33:

"Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

When Jesus tells these little stories – he calls the parables; in our day we might call them "tweets" -- it's worth having a second, maybe third look at what he's saying rather than take them at face value. You'll see, sometimes, that Jesus lulls us into a pattern of thought so that we seize on a shiny object he holds up – like the pearl of great price in one of his more famous illustrations – and think that jewel is the point of his message (it's not; it's the search for the pearl that counts).

It also seems that sometimes it's a combination of the parable itself and where Jesus is telling it that makes a key difference. For example, when Jesus told the story of the "Great and Generous Sower" distributing seeds indiscriminately over poor, bad, and good soil, he told the parable even as he was tossing generous fistfuls of wisdom

over a seaside audience of the good, bad, and indifferent. The setting mirrors the message.

And now, in today's parables from the gospel of Matthew, we find yet another reason to tread carefully when Jesus takes to telling stories, to wait a beat or two before declaring – as Jesus' own disciples did – "I got it!"

A great many of Jesus' parables are tied together by a single theme – they are answers to the question, what is the kingdom of heaven like? And in many cases the answers to that question feature things of value – in the form of hidden treasure, or a record haul of fish, or the promise of a great wheat harvest.

Today's lesson brings us the same theme – the nature of the kingdom of heaven – but the things used to illustrate that kingdom are, well, peculiar. The mustard seed is a long way from a treasure hidden in a field. A lump of yeast is nothing like a pearl of great price. You wouldn't imagine someone selling all they own to possess a handful of mustard seeds. If you switched a cup of yeast for that shiny pearl its owner searched so hard to find, I doubt the reaction would be joy. Today's images are of insignificant things of very little value. And yet, somehow, they represent the kingdom of heaven.

Not only are they of little value, but both seed and yeast are visually bland; no one is going to be dazzled by the sight of them. Unlike treasure or pearl, these things today are meant to be buried, either in soil or in dough; hidden from sight, certainly not put on display. But they're like the kingdom of heaven.

So where is Jesus taking us here? The fair answer is to another dimension of God's kingdom. The point of today's parables seems to be less how someone comes into the kingdom as how the kingdom itself grows. Now we've been told since our first days in Sunday School that God's realm expands when we share the Good News. When we evangelize the Gospel in word and in deed. It's a very positive picture of enthusiastic disciples preaching from the pulpit, standing on the street corner, working in the soup kitchen, restoring storm-wracked communities through demonstrations of love and compassion -- fruits we're willing to share because Christ first shared them with us. That's how the kingdom grows!

And no doubt Jesus would agree. He's told us as much, many times! But he seems to be telling us that the kingdom also grows covertly, under cover, hidden from sight. And not only that, but the agents of kingdom growth are sometimes as common as garden weeds, which after all is what a mustard plant is, a weed. And that use of yeast as an agent, that's even stranger. Yeast is material that's decaying; in a sense, it contaminates what it touches, that's how it causes dough to rise, by fermenting in it. In another context, Jesus even attaches a negative meaning to yeast, when he warns his

disciples in Chapter 16 to “beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Jesus has to repeat this warning again after his followers seem not to understand that the “yeast” of the Temple authorities – their teachings – may corrupt rather than enlighten those who listen.

That, of course, is not what Jesus is saying yeast does for the kingdom. The teaching he is sharing through this parable is meant to suggest that – in contrast with powers and authorities like the Pharisees or the Romans – God’s kingdom will come about through a process largely unseen and not relying on agents of power and coercion. The message is very similar to the mustard seed, which also begins life hidden and spreads quickly through roots and vines until its ultimate size and spread shockingly comes in the form of a tree in which the birds of the air can build nests.

That’s the final result, but hiddenness and unsuspected growth seem to be the governing thought of mustard seed and yeast. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, just as much as gleaming treasure or luminous pearl.

I read recently a story of hidden growth reaching great size and unimaginable influence that I never suspected before. It involves the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who most people think of as the undisputed father of the Civil Rights movement, although he never claimed that title for himself. Instead, it is said that he bestowed the honor of Civil Rights founder on his father, Martin Luther King, Sr.

But before he died, “Daddy King,” as Martin Sr. was known, said the real father of the Civil Rights movement was the African-American preacher who baptized him, a man named Paschal. But the Reverend Paschal, before he died, said that the real father of the Civil Rights movement was a white Georgia legislator named Robert Alston, who, long before Civil Rights became a public issue, proposed legislation calling for fair and humane treatment of African-American convicts. In 1879, Alston was ambushed, shot, and killed by those who opposed his position.

But it was Alston who paid for Paschal to go to seminary, and Paschal baptized Daddy King, and Daddy King was the father of Martin Luther King, Jr., and out of this unseen movement and spread of seed and yeast, a new manifestation of God’s kingdom – the equality of all races – blossomed into view and grows to this day.

As Jesus said, a mustard seed grew into a tree, and birds of the air made nests in its shade. And, a woman took yeast and mixed it into 50 pounds of flour until the whole was leavened, feeding a community of many. The kingdom of heaven is like...that. Amen.