

Matthew 13:31-33

Reimagining the Kingdom of God

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¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with ^[d] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

I wonder if Jesus’ followers were disappointed as they heard these parables. Did they really want the kingdom of heaven to be like every day, ordinary things...mustard seeds and bread? Do we? Over the years, I’ve listened to Christians to talk about the kingdom of heaven. Typically, it’s a far-off place, with a long stairway leading to it, that contains streets paved with gold, angels floating on clouds playing harps, and everything glittery that can be imagined. God is there too. “He” is a king or a lord, sitting on a throne, requiring the adoration and praise of all who believe. This picture of the kingdom of heaven as an eternal home has nothing to do with what Jesus was talking about in our text today.

The phrase, “kingdom of heaven” is another way of saying “kingdom of God”, or “realm of God.” Jesus wasn’t talking about a far off, celestial place where people go after they die. He was talking about the here and the now. He was talking about the empire of God which was in direct contrast to the Roman Empire. You see, all of creation is the

kingdom of God. These parables are about the way this world could and should be.

The images presented were very familiar to Jesus' audience. A mustard seed. A mustard plant. Leaven. A woman making bread. These were parts of their world, parts of their everyday experiences. Jesus compared these ordinary things to the kingdom of heaven. I wonder, though, was that good news to them? And could it be good news for us?

In order to make sense of these parables, we need to know how the original hearers would have understood these things. You see, mustard for us, isn't like those mustard seeds you were handed with your bulletin this morning. Mustard belongs on a Chicago-style hot dog. For those who are not aware, a Chicago-style hot dog, is an all-beef frankfurter on a poppy seed bun. The hot dog is topped with yellow mustard, chopped white onions, bright green sweet pickle relish, a dill pickle spear, tomato slices, pickled sport peppers and a dash of celery salt.

And for us, leaven is the yeast that makes our breads and cakes rise and our beer brew. That these things would be used to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like seems a little strange. But maybe we can get behind the idea that the kingdom of heaven is like these delicious things to eat and drink? After all, I've seen t-shirts that say, "Beer is proof that God loves us."

Let's try to set aside *our* understanding of mustard and yeast and think about them like the original listeners might have understood them. As we do, let's reimagine these parables, maybe even assigning new meaning to them in this time and place. As we try to imagine something different and new, let's remember parables are part of an oral tradition. They are stories, originally spoken and heard, not written

down and read, and just because they are about everyday things does not mean they are meant to be taken literally. I believe parables contain truth, but not facts.

Let's start with the mustard seed. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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."

Who learned the point of this parable was that something small grows into something big? In other words, the kingdom of God starts small and becomes something great. Not a bad thing, right? The problem is, that interpretation doesn't make sense when we know what the original listeners knew.

First, nobody would have intentionally planted mustard seeds in their field or garden. While the plant has many good uses, it's like a weed. Like dandelions. If you were to plant those mustard seeds in your garden, you would regret it. Pliny the Elder, first century author of more than 30 books on natural history, wrote this about mustard, "It [mustard] grows entirely wild...when once it has been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it."

Secondly, it is not realistic to expect that a mustard plant would grow into a tree and the original listeners would have known that. So, why would Jesus say that? The imagery of the tree and the birds coming to nest in it, is meant to call to mind an image from the common story telling tradition which also includes the Hebrew Bible.

When Jesus talked about a great tree with birds nesting in it, it would have called to mind images from Ezekiel and Daniel; a mighty tree with birds nesting in its branches or shade; the mighty cedar of Lebanon.

The point in the parable isn't that the mustard plant really turns into a tree, the point is it raises the question, "What would an empire be like--a mustard plant or the noble, mighty tree of Lebanon? Certainly, the

Roman Empire was like a large, dominant tree. But the empire of God...that's different. For Jesus, God's empire was not about domination. My seminary New Testament professor, Bernard Brandon Scott, wrote this in his book *Reimagine the World*, "God's empire is more pervasive than dominant. It is like a pungent weed that takes over everything and in which the birds of the air can nest; it bears little resemblance to the mighty, majestic, noble symbol of empire of Israel or Caesar. Take your choice, says the parable."

The kingdom of God that Jesus imagined worked its way into every nook and cranny of the world, making itself known little by little, providing shade and a place to rest for the most vulnerable.

Why would this parable have been good news to Jesus' listeners? For one thing, whatever else it may mean, this parable hints that God's empire is fundamentally different than Rome's. The early followers of Jesus had been controlled and dominated their whole lives. For them, maybe there was hope in the tenacity of the mustard plant. Maybe, someday, they too would rest there...like the birds in their nests.

How do we imagine the kingdom of God? Like a mustard plant or a mighty cedar? In all honesty, historically, Christians have co-opted the ways of the Empire...Onward Christian Soldiers, taking over the world, claiming our way is the only way, even doing violence to people who disagree with us. The kingdom of God is not meant to dominate, insist on its own way, control, and lord over. So, for whom, today, is this parable good news? Maybe for the ones who are tired of fighting for justice alone, the ones for whom the current system is not working, who are in need of a place to rest, who cry out for other people to walk with them as they find their voices and tell their stories...immigrants, people of color.

Turning now to the second parable...the leaven.

“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.”

In the story, the woman is making the bread herself.

This suggests that the audience is a rural audience. In an urban area, a person bought bread in the bakery. So, we are imagining a rural peasant woman preparing to bake bread. First, starting this story with the word, “leaven” would have been quite unsettling in the ancient world. Leavening often stood as a metaphor for moral corruption. In the New Testament there are a number of examples of the negative use of leavening. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus warns the disciples concerning the leaven or corruption of Herod and the Pharisees. And in the Hebrew Bible, unleavened bread is a powerful symbol of the holy. During Passover, all of the leavened bread had to be cleansed out of the house. God’s realm couldn’t be anything like leaven. This parable begins with Jesus essentially saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like moral corruption.” A very bad start indeed.

And then there’s the main character in the story...a woman. What could a *woman* possibly have to do with the kingdom of God? But moving on, three measures of flour...that’s a lot of flour. Why 3 measures? We have to look again at the common story telling tradition. Way back in Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah received 3 visitors. These were the heavenly visitors who told them that Sarah would have a baby. When the visitors arrived, Abraham told Sarah to go and bake bread using 3 measures of flour again, A LOT of flour, enough to feed 100 people. The use of the phrase “3 measures of flour” would remind the listeners of this story, a story of when God came near. Finally... we have an image of great size and import, worthy of God. But wait, the woman works the leaven into every bit of that flour...it’s all corrupt. How can this be? What could this mean?

How can this be good news and for whom?

I would think, first it would be good news for women. In this story, a woman has a major role in the kingdom of God...a woman just as she is, doing something that she does every day, is intricately involved in the realm of God. In addition, this story would have been good news for “the leaven” , the ones who were seen as “less than,” in their society. In fact, Jesus said, God’s realm is just like them. God’s realm is like the people who were poor, the people who were sick, the people who were weak. This parable was good news for all of them. And the people for whom this was bad news? The ones who were benefiting from the current system. God’s activity is not like what they had imagined or even like the scriptures predicted. You see...God’s realm always blurs the lines between the sacred and the ordinary. God comes near, working in ways that run counter to the ways of a typical empire...counter to the ways of thrones and towers, power and wealth.

One of the things I learned from Brandon Scott in my New Testament classes was that it can sometimes be helpful to translate a parable into contemporary terms. So, this week I spent time thinking about that. How might we talk about the kingdom of heaven today, using imagery from our world?

The kingdom of heaven is like an immigrant studying English by flashlight as he hides in the desert.

The kingdom of heaven is like a black man who earns his GED and finds his voice while behind the walls of a for profit prison.

The kingdom of heaven is like a transgender soldier who defends even the ones who deny his or her humanity.

Knowing this congregation like I do, these parables probably don’t make you too uncomfortable. But what about this...

The kingdom of heaven is like a politician...How can that be? How can anything that starts with politician be like the kingdom of heaven? The kingdom of heaven is like a politician who writes legislation that denies healthcare to millions of people.

The congressman's actions mobilized millions of people, gave hundreds opportunities to tell their story, and reminded us what kind of people we are called to be. So, in that respect, the actions of that politician, like the actions of the woman with the unholy leaven are, indeed, like the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven will not be silenced. And it will not be contained.

The kingdom of heaven that Jesus told his listeners about was sacred and ordinary. It was personal and communal. It was small and it was big. The kingdom of heaven was and is now and in the future. I think the trick for us is to recognize the glimpses we are given into this kingdom. Recognize it in the eyes of the family who is homeless, in the lives of our difficult co-workers, in the arguments of the ones with whom we disagree, and in the stories we have yet to hear. The kingdom of heaven is everywhere and it is our job to make it known.

I will leave you with one last parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a small church in Oklahoma that rejected right religion and instead just loved people. Amen.