

The Hidden Kingdom
A Sermon on Matthew 13:31-35, 44-53
Proper 12
July 26, 2020

Introduction

We have five parables today. Some of them are only a verse or two. The test of a good parable is whether it has rough edges. Do you see something new every time you read it? Does it challenge some of your comfortable assumptions about the kingdom?

The Parables Discourse takes up all of Chapter 13 in the Gospel of Matthew. It is one of five great discourses in Matthew. Today we will conclude the Parables Discourse.

Each of the five parables today begins with the same formula, “The kingdom of the heavens is like . . .” The five things it is like are a mustard seed, leaven, buried treasure, a merchant and a dragnet. The parables ask us to see the kingdom reflected in all these things.

First Move: Two Parables of Corruption

We begin with two parables of corruption. First, the kingdom of heavens is like the seed of a mustard plant. Have any of you seen a mustard seed? Have any of you grown mustard?

Mustard would have been considered a weed. It was not planted in gardens, which were for vegetables and herbs. It is invasive. It grows wild in fields. Mustard seeds are small black seeds. As someone is planting a garden with fruits and vegetables, the mustard seeds could be undetectable; they could be mixed in with the other seeds.

Mustard is an annual plant. It grows into a bush that is four to six feet high. Imagine that it is a sunflower that you see on the side of the highway.

Why then does the parable say that the mustard plant grew to be a tree. Trees were an image for empire. Birds nesting in the trees were nations under the control of the empire. The tree could symbolize the Gentile nations gathering to Jerusalem. at the end of the era.

A more common image for a tree would have the cedars of Lebanon. That was the finest wood that was available in antiquity. That's not what God is like. Our God hangs out in mustard plants.

Our God also hangs out in leaven. The kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman hid in three seahs of flour. The text says leaven not yeast. Yeast was not invented in the first century. People used leaven instead of yeast. Both act by fermentation; they convert carbohydrates into carbon dioxide and alcohol. It is the same process by which grapes are turned into wine.

Leaven was made by taking a lump of bread or dough, covering it, and putting in a dark place until it molds. The moldy bread or dough is then put into flour and heated to make it rise.

Leaven had come to be an image of corruption for Jews. The only type of bread that Jews can eat at Passover is unleavened bread. At the time of the original Passover, they had to be ready to travel quickly. They didn't have time for the leaven to mold or for the bread to rise.

This is the favorite parable of my New Testament professor, Brandon Scott, who wrote a commentary on the parables. The kingdom of God is compared to leaven, an image of corruption. A woman is a symbol of God; she hides the leaven in the flour by working it into the flour. The leaven spreads throughout all the bread; it is like a virus.

The woman uses an extravagant amount of flour. It is usually translated as three measures of flour, but a more literal translation is three seahs of flour. A seah is a Hebrew dry measure. One seah is equivalent to 144 eggs. Three seahs equals 432 eggs. It is the same amount of flour that Sarah used when she baked bread for the three strangers at the oaks of Mamre. It makes enough bread to feed 100-150 people.

How is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed and leaven? Both the mustard seed and the leaven are hidden now. We can't detect their presence. Then they have extravagant growth. We are surprised that agents of corruption are present in the kingdom. It upsets our conventional expectations of the kingdom. Our understandings of the kingdom are provisional, subject to change, as God reveals the kingdom in all its glory to us.

Jesus has been telling parables from a boat just off the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The crowd has been standing on the shore. Matthew says that Jesus speaks only in parables to the crowd. He quotes Psalm 78, which says, "I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old." The purpose is to show that part of Jesus' activity as a prophet is speaking in parables. Psalm 78 is perhaps an attempt to respond to the riddle of why Israel rebelled against God. The people didn't

understand the prophets because they spoke in parables. They had to be explained. God's ways don't come easily to us.

Second Move: Parables on Responding to the Kingdom

Jesus leaves the boat and goes into a house, where he continues telling parables to the disciples.

Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and tares, which Mary preached on last week. Jesus then tells two parables about how to respond to finding the kingdom of the heavens.

Jesus says that the kingdom is like a treasure that is hidden in a field. People in the first century often hid their valuables by burying them in the ground. We see this in the parable of the talents, where one of the servants buries his talent instead of investing it. The treasure belongs to whoever owns the land.

This is a morally ambiguous parable. The man who finds the treasure does not tell the man who owned the land about it. Instead he sells all that he has and buys the land for himself. He is a shrewd trader.

The kingdom of the heavens is also like a merchant who finds a pearl. Pearls were imported, usually from India. Merchants were dealers in international trade. They would have been seen as morally ambiguous. When the merchant finds one precious pearl, he sells all that he has and buys it.

This would put him out of business if he keeps the pearl. He has no possessions left to buy and sell with.

Both the man who buys the field and the merchant who buys the pearl are held up as examples because they responded appropriately to the kingdom of the heavens. Unlike the rich man who goes away dejected, they sell all they have.

The kingdom of the heavens is also like a dragnet. A dragnet is a net that is used to catch fish. It is several hundred feet long. It is pulled between two boats. The boats pull the dragnet along the bottom of the sea. When it is raised and brought to shore, it has a tremendous catch of fish of all kinds, whatever is swimming in the sea. The fishermen separate the good fish from the rotten fish.

The parable of the dragnet is similar to the parable of the wheat and the tares. It is the only one of the five parables today that Jesus goes on to provide an allegorical explanation for. It is a parable about the judgment that will take place at the end of the age. Matthew uses it as a warning to the people in his community to avoid taking the kingdom for granted. They should treasure it as a prize and value it more than all their possessions.

Jesus asks the disciples if they understand all the parables, and they say, “Yes.” The disciples respond differently in the Gospel of Mark. There they don’t get it until after the Resurrection. Matthew shapes these parables to respond to his community at the time he wrote his gospel. Scribes are portrayed in a positive light. They are Christian scribes, whose job is to instruct the community. They take wisdom, both new and old, from the treasure chest. Most commentators believe that the old means the Torah, what we call the Old Testament, and the new means the teachings of Jesus. The scribes understand the old and the new and teach the rest of the community how to apply the old and the new. Ministers assume the role of the scribes today, studying ancient texts and explaining how they relate to what is new in our lives.

Third Move: The Mystery of the Kingdom

These parables get us back to basics about the kingdom of the heavens, or the kingdom of God. John Dominic Crossan has one of the best explanations: The kingdom of God is what things here on earth would look like if heaven came down to earth. Heaven is doing quite well already. God is running things there. God left it to us to manage things here on earth. The kingdom is God’s vision of what things here on earth should look like if heaven were our model.

If we believe that one of God’s essential attributes is mystery, then God’s vision for us also has some mystery to it. The parables use the word *hidden* instead of *mystery*. The kingdom is already present among us, we just can’t see it most of the time. It is hidden from our view.

We would all say that the kingdom is good, it is where goodness is embodied, but that doesn’t help much. People have always had different understandings of the good. Nearly everyone, even the people we believe are evil, are acting out of their understanding of what is good. Dictators and abusers act out of their belief about what is good. They may be confused about what is really good. They may conflate the good with their own self interest or with the self interest of their favored group or tribe. They may have a distorted understanding of reality.

For God’s vision, our best source is the gospels, especially Jesus’ parables. Historical Jesus scholars believe that one of the unique things about the historical Jesus was that he spoke in parables. We have a series of parables today about what the kingdom of God is like. It is not propositional. Jesus never says, the kingdom is A, B and C. He tells stories about it and compares it to things in ordinary life on the farm and in the village.

The parable of the leaven is rated by the Jesus Seminar as the most likely verse in the New Testament to have been spoken by the historical Jesus. Does that surprise

you? Have you always understood the kingdom as being like leaven, that mixes in with flour?

Jesus intends to stretch our understanding of the kingdom. We have an idea of what it is like, but are still searching to understand and experience the kingdom in all its fullness.

Progressive Christianity grew out of the social gospel movement at the end of the 19th century. It tends to focus on social justice issues. It can be hard to distinguish from progressive politics if the kingdom is limited to social justice.

Conservative Christians tend to focus on individual salvation and an individual's relationship with Christ. They also tend to conflate the kingdom with heaven; it is a place that your spirit goes after you die.

Protestants have been rediscovering the mystical tradition of the church in the last century. Mystics try to make room for God by letting go of their thoughts and opening themselves up, listening for God. Their goal is communion with God.

The kingdom could be all of these things. One doesn't necessarily exclude the other. The personal and mystical aspects of the kingdom tend to be hidden from progressive Christians. The social dimensions tend to be hidden from conservative Christians.

The kingdom is more than any of us can imagine. It is *both and* not *either or*. Hopefully, the nearer we come to the kingdom, the more it comes into focus.

Jesus' parables are intended to point out how near the kingdom is to us, whether we are unaware of it or not. It is like a mustard seed growing in our midst. It is present whenever we come across the least of these.

Most of us are far enough along in our faith journeys that we know when we are approaching the kingdom. You are eager to deepen your spiritual lives. You are eager to study the Bible. You are eager to support prisoners on death row. You and the people in several Disciples churches in Oklahoma and New Mexico were eager to support Mary's mission to the Navajo Nation. You are eager to support the Kasongo family.

None of us thought five years ago that our faith journeys would take us to teachings from the mystics or to death row or to the Navajo Nation or to a family from the Congo. We are finding that they fill our lives with meaning.

Conclusion

Much of the kingdom is still hidden to us. It reaches out to us and draws us toward it. Where it will take us will surprise us. Perhaps the Kasongo family will help reveal more of the kingdom to us.

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