

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He 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."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

In today's lectionary reading, Jesus shares several parables about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not just some far off place toward which we are traveling, as in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Remember, when Jesus began his ministry, Mark quotes him saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Good News!"

We may imagine that the kingdom of heaven is someplace we go at the end of our lives, but not so! We are living it right here and now. Think of it...

The kingdom of heaven is like a team of folks in the kitchen cooking nourishing meals for older or disabled people who can't cook for themselves and drivers who deliver those delicious meals.

The kingdom of heaven is like people going to George School to read Dr. Seuss books to celebrate reading with young children who sometimes squeal with delight at the stories.

The kingdom of heaven is like a team of teenagers and Sal cooking a good hot meal and going out to Stewpot to serve lunch to people who otherwise wouldn't have a good, nourishing meal on a Sunday.

The kingdom of heaven is like a team of men cooking a special breakfast to celebrate the beginning of a new Sunday School year...

Of course, I could go on and on with examples of how we can see the kingdom of God right here in our midst. Yes, the kingdom of heaven is like this and so much more. If I invited you to come forward and name other places where you've glimpsed the kingdom of God, I suspect we'd be here past lunch time.

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, is filled with parables of the Kingdom. Last week's reading was about a sower whose crop has both wheat and weeds. In this week's reading Jesus tells one short parable after another, determined that his hearers will get the point.

We might not have watched a tiny mustard seed grow into a large bush, but I suspect that many of us have watched yeast cause dough to “rise” so that we have delicious, fluffy rolls for a special dinner.

It’s relatively easy to understand the kingdom of God as a treasure hidden in a field, that is worth every penny we can scrape up to acquire that field and the hidden treasure. But the parable of the mustard seed is quite odd.

The disciples must have scratched their heads at this story. Mustard seeds are not what the sower wanted to have among the wheat. The little mustard seeds somehow got bagged up with the wheat seeds by accident.

When the mustard plants began to grow and tower over the wheat, the farmer must have been very frustrated. If he tried to pull up the mustard plants, he would also pull up the wheat. He would just have to wait until harvest time and separate the wheat from the mustard plants. **He would just have to wait**

When we first REED this parable we might wonder where Jesus is going with this story. Theodore Wardlaw, the President of Austin Seminary, suggests a surprising direction for this story. Perhaps like me, you have thought about this story the way he suggests. He says,

“More often than not, we want to draw clear, unarguable boundaries around the kingdom of heaven. It is fair to have doubts, fair to explore what we believe and what we have trouble in believing; but it is not fair for us to gather on Sunday and say “Jesus Christ is Lord!” while at the same time behaving as if Jesus were dispensable—just a nice guy living in the first century who went about doing good.

“In the church, we want to be able to define what fits within it and what does not. So naturally, there are important formulaic things we say. We have Scripture.

We have creeds.

We have liturgy.

We have tradition.

We have convictions about baptism.

We have boundaries— **nice neat rows of carefully tended doctrine.**

“Then, just to keep us honest, and just when we are least expecting it, we also have the **voice of God whispering in our ear—pushing us beyond our boundaries**, forcing us to discern whether they are in fact our boundaries or God’s boundaries.”

President Wardlaw goes on to say that, that “in this sense ‘the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed’—a tiny little symbol of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things. It just hides in there—in the sack, in the hand, in the church, in the mind of God—like a mustard seed, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value hidden amid the rest, like the tasty fish hidden amid the whole catch.”

Here at Fondren Presbyterian Church, we have diversity! Now, it’s possible to think how peaceful and harmonious our congregation would be if we all thought alike.

Really? If all of us were exactly alike, where would the growth come from? I smile when I think of a comment Ruth Bell Graham, wife of Billy Graham once made. Someone asked if she and her husband thought alike. Her sparky comeback was, “If we were both just alike, there’d be no need for the other person!”

Good point!

Sometimes, we might feel that unity is the most important quality a church must have. On the other hand, when we bring different points of view into a gathering, we expand our viewpoints and our understanding and have the potential for being like the loaf of bread that has blossomed from the addition of yeast. Instead of being a flat pita, we expand into a fine, tasty round boule of bread that feeds more people!

When we worry about low church attendance or diminished giving, perhaps we need to remember this is Christ’s church, and He is still here in our midst as he promised to be. So, asking that worn out question, “What would Jesus do?” might be just what we need to consider.

Instead of worrying about the future, let’s listen again to the last verse in today’s reading. Jesus said to his followers, and still says to us: “Every one who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

So, remember! You and I have been trained for the kingdom of heaven. We are rich in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we have Jesus' teaching guide in the gospels. This treasure...old and new...is enough.

According to theologian and missiologist Darrell Guder, **the CHURCH (itself) is a parable of the kingdom.** As the Body of Christ, we truly do **embody** the good news. The kingdom of heaven is like you and me, ordinary "sinner/saints," when the Spirit shines through us to scatter the clouds and mists of this beautiful, broken world that God so loves!

We have work to do.

We...you and I...have been "Called as Partners in Christ's Service." So, let us be about our Father's business!

Let us pray: Amazing God, send us out to be your faithful, energetic disciples, bearing the good news that "Christ is alive and is working among and within us!"

Amen.