

Seed Faith

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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7/27/08

Matthew 13:31-35 (NRSV)

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 three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

[34] Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.

[35] This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth to speak in parables;

I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

"Thy kingdom come."

We say this every week when we say the Lord's Prayer. But, exactly what does that mean? I think most of you know by now that God's kingdom is not like other kingdoms.

And these past few weeks as we've studied some parables of the kingdom we've noticed the difference. Two weeks ago we talked about the extravagance of God's grace, how God sows his seed of salvation on all kinds of soil, both good and bad.

Last week we thought about how God overcomes evil. Instead of plucking up weeds from the field right away (and in the process destroying the wheat field) God waits until the end, and then makes a judgment. Perhaps we should show the same kind of patience and forbearance.

Today's parables of the kingdom are about how God's kingdom gets started. You might think of these parables as God's plan for new church development.

NEW CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

I know a little bit about new church development. If you want a church to grow you have to plant it in a fertile neighborhood and develop a program that appeals to the people who live there.

It's helpful if you spend several years doing demographic studies of the area and then very carefully select a person to lead this new church, preferably a person who has specific training and experience with new church developments. We even sent the new pastor in the Poinciana

Hispanic new church development to Texas to take a battery of tests to make sure that he was the one we wanted for this very difficult task of starting a new church.

But, even with the most careful selection process, we know that this new work will need our financial support and encouragement. New church developments often fail, and we need to help in any way that we can.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm going to say. I believe in new church development, and I believe in planning and research. I think that anything we can do to make new churches successful and strong is a good thing.

But, once again I think that our desire to plan and bring in the kingdom in an organized way needs to be tempered by the knowledge that our ways are often not God's ways. Sometimes I think that our overly analytical approach to kingdom building hinders instead of helps.

For example, one of the strongest new church plants in our Presbytery was not created by us. It was a spontaneous fellowship group that grew to the point that it became a church. Their leader was not specially trained for the task but a lay pastor who felt the call of God.

Certainly we have helped this church, and we have tried to equip this lay pastor for the job he has, but I have to wonder if we might be more successful in our new church development if we were more flexible. Perhaps we should adopt a process that acknowledges the fact that when it comes to God's kingdom we often get it wrong.

Quite often God's ways are often not our ways.

MY KINGDOM COME

This is true not only in new church development but also in other areas of our life and work together as well. Every week we say "Thy kingdom come" and then we go on making plans for the kingdom that we envision. Kingdom building of any kind must be based primarily upon God's word as revealed in Jesus instead of our own desires and ideas. But, that's easier said than done.

From the first disciples right down to the present day we make the same mistake. We say "thy kingdom come," but we often mean "my kingdom come."

When you read the gospels it's apparent that those first disciples wanted a kingdom based upon their own desires instead of the kingdom that came with Jesus. They wanted a kingdom based upon political power, a kingdom of this world.

Even when Jesus had risen from the dead and came back to encourage his disciples in the job of proclaiming the kingdom they still misunderstood. They still thought that the kingdom of God would be some kind of military coup.

It took an invasion of God's Spirit at Pentecost to finally get the point across. The kingdom of God was much broader and deeper than they had understood. Instead of limiting the message to one people it was a message to be proclaimed to the whole world. It was a message of salvation, not a message of power politics. The kingdom of God is almost always a surprise.

And in today's lesson we learn that bigger isn't always better.

But, despite the coming of the Spirit and despite the example of the early disciples, we still have a hard time accepting that message.

Someone once said that if you're going to study church history you better have a strong faith. That's true. The study of church history can be very discouraging. Over and over and over again we have done just the opposite of what Jesus taught in the name of Jesus! Kingdoms built in the name of Jesus have often been terrible mistakes.

So what is the kingdom of God like?

WEED SEED

In the first parable Jesus tells us that God's kingdom gets started like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field.

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds around, but it is a very potent seed. Before long a huge bush springs up, and birds are attracted to the shade and the seeds produced by this very prolific plant.

Remember that a parable is a story with a surprise. A parable has a twist that you don't expect. But, once again this parable seems very straightforward. We might be tempted to say that this parable means something like the old saying, "Tall oaks from little acorns grow." I've heard many a sermon on this passage that could essentially be boiled down to this phrase.

But, if we do that we have once again missed the point of this parable. We have turned this very provocative parable into a somewhat tame object lesson.

Here's the surprise that we often miss. The mustard plant was a weed. No self respecting farmer would want weeds in his garden, and he certainly wouldn't want a weed that would attract birds that would eat his crops.

If Jesus were telling this parable in southern Georgia today he might say something like this, "The kingdom of God is like kudzu that a farmer planted in his field. He started with just a little bit, but pretty soon it covered not only his whole field but the highway as well!"

For those of you who haven't spent much time in South Georgia kudzu is a weed that is taking over the whole state. If we ever learn how to use kudzu to run our cars, those guys in the Middle East will be out of business.

Now you understand the surprise of this passage. The mustard plant was a weed like kudzu. What kind of crazy farmer wants more kudzu?

If I preach from these passages again I'm going to make it sermon series entitled, "Lessons from the World's Worst Farmer." Jesus envisions a farmer who just scatters seed anywhere and everywhere lets the weeds grow with the wheat, and now we find out that he also scatters a potent weed seed in his own field.

Jesus might have been many things, but a master gardener he was not!

SEEDS OF HEAVEN

But, of course the Bible is not a course on how to make your garden grow. The Bible is about the kingdom of God and how it grows. And the parables in particular are an attempt to try and translate this heavenly message into "earthy" terms.

I like the way Barbara Brown Taylor talks about this in her sermon, "Seeds of Heaven." She wrote,

"How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God?"

Perhaps we do best if we use the most ordinary things, as Jesus did, and trust "each other to make the connections ... We cannot say what it is, exactly, but we can say what it is like, and most of us get the message ..."

So today we learn the kingdom of God is potent, like a weed seed scattered in the garden. From a very small beginning it takes over the garden and attracts the wrong company.

NOT KOSHER

This was not only a mistake in gardening; it was also a mistake in religion. The Torah purity code taught that things that are not alike should not be mixed. In Leviticus we read that you should not plant your field with two kinds of seed. (See Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9)

In other words, it wasn't kosher to plant wild seeds in your garden. It would defile your crop and attract birds who would be a nuisance.

But, the purity code was not just about enforcing strange customs and traditions or making you into a successful farmer. It was a way of saying,

"We are God's chosen people and because of that we are different. We have rules to live by. We are careful about how we conduct our business. We don't want to attract the wrong kind of people. We don't want to be defiled by careless living."

And into this fastidious community of faith Jesus comes and perhaps with a twinkle in his eye he says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. This little seed soon took over everything and even attracted undesirable birds.”

The early church really struggled with this issue. Christianity started as a Jewish sect but it was rapidly being overcome by large numbers of Gentile converts. Pentecost was just the beginning.

The faith spread like wildfire, and for those who were accustomed to doing everything decently and in order (like us Presbyterians) it was a cause for concern. It was like someone had sown a wild seed in their field of faith.

WEED SEED TODAY

Well, that’s what happened, and that’s what is still happening in God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom continues to grow out of control and attract birds of a different feather. I wonder, “What wild seed is Jesus sowing in our community of faith?”

When we pray “thy kingdom come” we need to realize that we are giving up control. We are saying, “Lord, whatever needs to change in my life and in this world I’m for it. Let me get on board with your kingdom. Help me get with the program.”

Are you really ready to say that? Are you really ready for a wild seed to be sown in your garden, a seed that will take over your life and lead you in directions that you could never imagine on your own? Are you really ready to deal with those birds of a different feather that will come into your life, birds that need the shade and nourishment of God’s kingdom?

History teaches us that we are not ready for that. In fact we don’t want that kind of radical change. To paraphrase a Burger King commercial, “We want to have the kingdom our way.” Don’t disturb our carefully tilled garden of faith Lord. I want to follow you, but I want to do it my way.

But, the last time I looked “I Did It My Way” is not in any of our many hymnals. When we say “thy kingdom come” we are saying that we’ll do it God’s way. He is the potter. We are the clay.

SEED FAITH

It’s hard for us to give up control, but there is an advantage. If it’s not our kingdom then we can serve God without always being worried about results because we know that the smallest act of service can be used by God to do great things.

I call this seed faith. If we will only be faithful with what God has given us today, tomorrow will take care of itself.

Do you remember when Moses saw the burning bush, and was called by God to deliver his people from the land of Egypt? He was a shepherd tending his father in law's sheep in the middle of the desert. He considered himself to be a nobody without power and influence. And he was.

So when God called Moses to set his people free Moses replied, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

I think that quite often we miss the call of God because we have the same attitude. We think that our lives are small and insignificant.

And yet, if we bring what we have to God it is always enough. The smallest seed grows like kudzu in God's kingdom. There is unexpected power and promise in even the most humble of lives.

This is a theme that continues throughout Scripture. To paraphrase the Marine recruitment slogan, God calls the few, the humble, and the insignificant. God calls the weeds of the world to change the world for the better.

Most of us have wondered from time to time, "Have I really done anything significant with my life?" Even our proudest accomplishments seem relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

And we might be right to wonder that. The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes points out in great detail that everything is futile. Everything that our world holds dear will pass away before you know it. Work, wisdom, money ... you name it ... it all passes away. We are just dust in the wind.

And we are left to wonder if there is indeed any meaning to life. Can one small life really make a difference? Could God really use someone like me?

GOD'S SEED CHANGED EVERYTHING

God's answer to that question is found in a seed, a seed that He planted in an alien and hostile world long ago.

This seed was a babe born in a stable. This seed was a teacher who taught on a hillside in the country. This seed was a condemned man who was slain on a cross and planted in a tomb.

He was just one man, an insignificant man most thought.

But, he was God's seed planted in the field of the world. And that seed did not stay in the ground. His resurrection changed eleven men from cowards into disciples. And those eleven men preached the gospel in the power of the Spirit and the message spread like kudzu.

This wild weed of a faith was so strong that enemies of the Apostle Paul and some other disciples made this accusation, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ...” (Acts 17:6)

Like most of Jesus’ teachings how you take them depends upon your circumstance in life. If you like your life the way it is and if you don’t want your nice settled life to be disturbed then the gospel might not be such good news. The kingdom is like a wild weed that destroys your well manicured garden.

But, if you find yourself on the underside of life and don’t know where turn or if you think of yourself as small and insignificant ... then this parable might be just what you need to hear. The seed that God planted in his Son, Jesus can be a large flowering plant, a plant that can give you shelter and nourishment in your time of need.

And more than that, this same God can use your small life to make a big difference in his kingdom. The world is turned upside down when sinners are saved by the grace.

Are you ready to have your world turned upside down?

All you have to do is mean it when you say “thy will be done” and “thy kingdom come.”

OATMEAL COOKIES

A pastor told of a woman in her 80s who bakes oatmeal cookies twice a week in batches of 30 or more cookies and takes them to the local youth prison camp.

The pastor thought that it was a nice gesture and nothing more. Baking cookies was a pleasant way for an older person to be occupying her time

But, he found out that those cookies were seeds, seeds that were making a big change. The superintendent of the prison camp said,

“Those cookies have transformed this whole place. Some of the young men who are incarcerated here have never in their whole lives received a gift from anybody until they got a bag of those cookies.

They stand there at the door, behind the bars, eagerly awaiting those cookies, as if they were a bunch of boys on Christmas Day, rather than a group of convicted criminals. Those cookies have changed them.”

The pastor said, “I will never look at an oatmeal cookie in the same way again.”

And maybe that’s the point of this little parable. In the hands of our Savior Oatmeal cookies and mustard seeds can change the world.

God give us eyes to see and ears to hear.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)