

A LITTLE BIT OF THE KINGDOM
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in Brookfield, Connecticut
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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."

In the gospel this morning, Jesus tells a series of parables comparing the kingdom of heaven to various things, and what we see in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast in particular is that a little bit of the kingdom goes a long way. Just like a tiny mustard seed that takes over an entire field, and just like a pinch of yeast that leavens an enormous batch of dough, the kingdom of heaven doesn't seem like much at first,

but once it gets going, it grows like wild and changes everything around it.

That's a beautiful thought and a wonderful image. But honestly, as members of a small church, with a small budget, doing what we can to make a difference in our local community, it can seem pretty out-of-touch with our experience. Sometimes it seems like all our efforts to help bring about the kingdom in our own little neck of the woods don't add up to much. All our

ministries, all our programs, all our prayers—sometimes they seem like a drop in the bucket compared to all the needs and challenges we see out there. And that can be pretty discouraging. Where's all that explosive growth Jesus is talking about? Where's the pay-off for all the blood, sweat, and tears we put into this place? Sometimes we wonder if it's worth it.

I don't think it's wrong to feel that way. I don't think it makes us bad Christians. But we have to remember that Jesus isn't making his followers a bunch of empty promises in this passage. He's not telling them the life they signed up for is going to be simple and easy. He's not saying the kingdom of heaven is going to appear—snap!—just like that. That's not what these parables are about. They're about widening the aperture through which we see. They're about opening our minds to a level of reality that's kind of bubbling away under the surface of our everyday lives—a level of reality that, once we perceive it, completely re-orders our values and priorities; a level of reality that has unlimited potential to transform the world as we know it; a level of reality that reflects God's will and intentions rather than our own.

Scott Hoezee is a former pastor who now directs The Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He had this to say in a commentary he wrote on this passage a few years ago:

"As bearers of God's kingdom, we keep plugging away at activities that may look silly or meaningless to the world but which we believe contain the very seed of a new creation. We keep coming to church and singing our old hymns, reciting our old formulas and creeds. We keep

cracking open an ancient book called the Bible, looking to find within it truths that are anything-but ancient. We keep visiting the sick and the dying and whispering prayers for the Spirit of the resurrection to be with us in life and in death. We keep sprinkling water onto squirming infants and popping cubes of bread into our mouths in the earnest faith that, through the Spirit, baptism and communion don't just mean something, they mean everything.

"And we keep working for Jesus in this mixed-up world of ours. We quietly carry out our jobs and raise our kids and tend our marriages in the belief that God has designs for all those things, and it's our job to follow them. We keep pointing people to an old rugged cross, having the boldness to suggest that the man who died on that cross is now the Lord of the universe."

When I read that, it really hit home with me. I know what Hoezee means when he talks about how the things we do in the church look to outsiders vs. what they mean to us. When I left ministry a few years ago and did something else for a while, I remember how at some point a shift happened. I started to see church from an outsider's perspective because that's what I was. I was an outsider. Church didn't have a place in my life anymore. Like most people today, I had my work-life and my home-life, and the routine of going to church every week and being involved in the life of a congregation seemed foreign to me. I felt disconnected from it. I'd go past a church when I was out on the road, and it would look like just any other building to me.

When I came back to ministry, though, after having been away for a

while, I saw with fresh eyes how rare and precious the life we share in this place really is—like the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great value Jesus mentions in some of the other parables this morning. As a truck driver, my worth as a human being came down to how many miles I drove that day and how many loads I delivered that week. It didn't matter what kind of person I was. It didn't matter how I treated others. "If the wheels ain't turning, you ain't earning." That was the truth I lived by.

But here in this place, we live by different truths. We live by the knowledge that we were made by God and put in this world to love and serve one another. We live by the understanding that we are God's beloved children, and there's nothing we can ever do to change that. We live by the belief that God came into the world and took on human form so we could see the life God wants for us. We live by the conviction that the life we see in Jesus is more real than anything we see around us. And what we do in this place week after week is make those truths real by living them. By supporting and caring for one another, by giving and receiving forgiveness, by offering ourselves in service to others, by putting our trust in God, we manifest a little bit of the kingdom right here in Brookfield.

And a little bit does go a long way. It may not always seem like it. We may not always be aware of it happening. But think about the difference this place has made in your own life. Think about how you've been shaped by all you've experienced and all you've learned. Think about how much you've given and how much you've gotten back. And then multiply that by the number of souls who've walked through those doors over past 40 years. I'll let you do the math.

But it's a lot. It's a lot of change, and a lot of transformation.

So every time we come to church; every time we sing one of our old hymns; every time we crack open the Bible; every time we visit the sick and the dying; every time we pray for the Spirit; every time we celebrate a sacrament; every time we point to the cross, we are in fact fulfilling the words we say every week: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.