

In the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Jesus put before the crowd another parable.” Actually it is four parables this morning. And they may well strike us, at first glance, as an odd little group of sayings. Today we may feel like we should just say, “Jesus! Spit it out! What are you trying to say? Just say it plainly.” The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed; it’s like a woman who puts yeast in bread; it’s like a treasure hidden in a field; and it’s like a pearl of great value. What?!? As I said, an odd group of sayings. Let’s dig into these short little pieces a bit and see if we can make any sense of them at all.

First, the mustard seed. Mustard is, indeed a small seed. But the smallest? Not really. And “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.” Not only is that an exaggeration, it borders on fabrication. While mustard does grow into shrubs, ones that can get to be six or more feet tall, it would be a very small, light bird that could nest in a mustard shrub, because the stems are not sturdy enough to support that kind of weight. This parable is Jesus at His hyperbolic best. The point is not whether or not a bird could nest in a mustard bush, or even whether mustard becomes a bush or a tree, but rather the amazing fact that Jesus compared the Kingdom of heaven to something as ordinary as a mustard seed or shrub at all.

Some scholars have said that Jesus is making fun of the comparisons made in ancient times between mighty trees and powerful kingdoms, like that of the Babylonians. For instance, in the Book of Daniel, the prophet compares Babylon to a mighty tree whose:

height was great. <sup>11</sup> The tree grew great and strong, its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth. <sup>12</sup> Its foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed<sup>1</sup>.

In discussing this possible satirical comparison between Babylon and the Kingdom of heaven, Professor Will Willimon has said,

So great a tree is impressive. Great, powerful kingdoms like Babylon, or the British Empire, or the United States, are impressive. By comparison Jesus presents a mustard bush, a mere shrub. The Kingdom of God is like a shrub? If there is impressiveness in God's Kingdom, it is sure not the impressiveness that we expect<sup>2</sup>.

Jesus never said things exactly the way His listeners – or we – thought, or think He should. Jesus, it seems, always compares the Kingdom of heaven to things we *don't* expect. Just like the rest of Jesus' message, the comparisons to the Kingdom are *meant* to make us scratch our heads and say, "I'd never thought of it that way." So too, here, when He tells his listeners, the Kingdom you search for is not at all what you think it will be. Again from Professor Willimon, what would we think:

If Jesus said to our congregation, 'You are doing a wonderful job, you are changing this neighborhood in a wonderful way, as great as if you

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 4:10-12 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> 36 *Pulpit Resources* No 3, Year A, July, August, September 2008, p. 18

were the sanitation department that put out new trashcans and changed the whole neighborhood.’ Or, ‘This church is doing great. When you speak your voice is like the roar of a huge mouse<sup>3</sup>.’

Perhaps Jesus was reminding everyone that God does not see things as we see them. The great nations may look like magnificent trees to us, but are no more significant than blades of grass to God. The Kingdom may look like a mustard seed to us, but what wonders God can do with a simple seed – given the right conditions. Which brings us the parable of the yeast.

Jesus said that the Kingdom is like yeast that a woman mixed in with 3 measures of flour. There are two interesting features here. First, Jesus mentions yeast in a positive way. Yeast is a leavening agent. Leaven is produced by something that has become rotten or rancid. Therefore, to Jews of Jesus’ day, leaven was the rotten part – the part not to be touched. Leaven was always used to compare a thing with something that was corrupt. So, when Jesus mentions the woman putting yeast in her bread, that would’ve been thought to have spoiled the bread. But Jesus says it is like the Kingdom of heaven. It makes a little more sense when we realize that the 3 measures would have been about 10 gallons of flour. When the woman added the yeast and let the dough rise, she would’ve created enough bread out of 3 measures to feed some 150-200 people.

So, like the parable of the mustard seed, this one is about an unexpected, almost upside down description of the Kingdom, not as something that spoils the end product (as

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

we might have expected), but something that makes the end product grow and become an amazingly abundant gift.

But what about those last two parables – the parable of the treasure in the field and the parable of the pearl of great value?

These two can be taken together. Their common trait is this ... when the person discovers the valuable thing (the hidden treasure in one parable, the pearl in the other), the person sells all he has and uses the proceeds to obtain this thing of great value. So the Kingdom of heaven is a thing of such great value that anyone who glimpses it should give up everything he or she has, in order to be able to obtain what is there for the taking – God's kingdom.

What is your favorite sport? What is the highest award given in that sport? If you love tennis, you could say it's the Rosewater Dish – the plate given to the winner of the Wimbledon Women's Singles competition. If it's football, it could be the Lombardy Trophy, given to the winner of the Super Bowl. NASCAR has the Sprint Cup, and Golf has four majors, but perhaps the green jacket given to a Masters Champion would be the ultimate. How did Trevor Immelman, Jimmie Johnson, the New York Giants, Venus Williams and all the other champions in their respective sports attain their most recent victories? By recognizing the great value in their lives of the thing they were after, and then selling all they had and getting this valuable thing.

No, I don't mean that they bought their championships. And I don't mean to be so flippant as to compare the Kingdom of heaven to winning the finals at Wimbledon, but in essence, that's what Jesus has done. Venus Williams has dedicated her life to being the best tennis player she can be, and to being good enough to defeat the others in the world who are called great. The same is true for any champion. And isn't that exactly what the landowner and the jeweler do in Jesus' parables? They give up everything they have to gain the one thing they want the most.

That is what Jesus asks of us through these parables – to see what is of the greatest value in the world and to then give up everything to get it. He wants us to see the ultimate value of the Kingdom of heaven and to be willing to give up everything to get that one thing of great value.

Are we? Are we willing to give up everything to gain the Kingdom of heaven? In all of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus says that we should be ready to take up our cross and follow Him<sup>4</sup>, so He must have meant this challenge to us.

Have you ever wanted something so bad that you would give up *anything* for it? That's how bad Jesus wants us to want the Kingdom of heaven.

So ... maybe, if we *really* want the Kingdom of heaven bad enough to give up whatever we have to get it, maybe then whatever we have of value we will give to God – the one who owns the Kingdom – and what we have given God will be folded into all of

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<sup>4</sup> Matt 10:35 (NRSV); Mark 8:34 (NRSV); Luke 9:23 (NRSV)

the other valuable things given to God by others because they too want the Kingdom. When God folds all of our valuable gifts in together, the leaven in them will begin to work and these little, small gifts we have will grow – like the tiny mustard seed grows – until what we have given *becomes* the Kingdom of heaven, that most valuable of things to obtain.

Hmm, maybe there's something to these parables after all.

Amen.