

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/July 27, 2014

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

"Big Packages in Little Things"

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In today's passage from Matthew 13 we have this collection of a number of Jesus' parables. We have the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven, the parable of the hidden treasure, the parable of the pearl of great value and then we have the parable of the dragnet, which is a parable of judgment.

The parables about the hidden treasure and the pearl, are similar and speak of the enormity of the value of the kingdom of heaven, or of God, or as some contemporary theologians are now calling it, the realm of God, God's empire or the empire of the heavens. Kate and I have come to use the word "kin-dom" as this speaks to the relational aspect of what Jesus was doing. Anyway, this kingdom, kin-dom, realm or empire that Jesus was calling people's attention to was something one gives all they have for, it is something so important that it becomes the most central part of a person's life.

The parable of the leaven and the mustard are also related. Both speak about the nature of the kin-dom as something that begins as a tiny thing but then surprisingly and unexpectedly grows into something much larger, or as in the case of the leaven or yeast as something that when introduced, spreads itself all around until it affects everything.

To speak more to that point, I want to read for you, a little gift I gave to Kate upon the completion of her PhD exam. It is a bit heady, but I think you will all be able to grasp it. This is the illustrated version. A literary classic: *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. **(Read book)**

This is a cute story that describes well what Jesus' parables of the mustard seed and the leaven seem to also be saying, that even with very small, humble, simple beginnings, a lot can happen.

However, Jesus' parables weren't so cute. On the surface, they may have seemed light and fanciful and at times, even humorous. But to those who had ears to hear, his stories could cut to the core. They could be sharp and edgy.

Take for instance the leaven. In his day, leaven, yeast, was seen by the religious elite, as a symbol of evil and the corruption of human nature. It was associated with decay and was basically produced by allowing old bread to spoil, to go rotten. So why would Jesus use such a symbol for the kingdom of heaven?

Well, it also had another reputation. Leaven was understood, as was honey to be one of the life-forces, because they caused fermentation and appeared to have a life all their own. Thus, like blood, another life-force, or anything with blood still in it, these things could not be used for sacrifice, for burning at the altar, because one did not burn or destroy any life-force.

So we can see Jesus sending a mixed message that on the one hand, may be critical of the Jewish Temple authorities, (using leaven, a symbol they saw as evil, to talk about this new movement he was leading), and yet supportive of traditional Jewish faith (comparing his movement to something positive, something with a life-force in it).

But it was certainly understood as subversive to the governing Roman authority. This kingdom of heaven, this realm of God's presence was something that might seem small, almost undetectable, or barely noticed, but which had the capacity to invade, infiltrate the environment into which it comes. Now those words, "invade" and "infiltrate" may not sound like words we would want to use to describe our faith or the church, today. They have a negative connotation. But that is precisely what Jesus would have intended. The kin-dom or realm that he was talking about was something that would enter and undermine the dominant social order that oppressed his people.

Likewise, mustard was not a nice plant. Jesus' parable about the tiny little mustard seed might seem harmless enough, a tiny seed grows into a big shrub. Hey what's so bad about that? It even gives a place for the birds! But for those who knew anything about mustard, they would have been very wary, very cautious about what he was saying. Because mustard is a very nasty, invasive plant. You would not want to plant it with your nice straight rows of beans or wheat, or corn because it would sneak into those fields and would crowd out the plants you really wanted to grow. It would invade and take over!

When I grew up in Wisconsin, we often visited my Uncle Doug and Aunt Lois' farm. I remember seeing mustard growing in fields. It was a yellow flowered plant. I didn't know much about it but knew that farmers hated it and heard that if it got a hold in a field it could wipe out an entire crop. It would spread like crazy. So it could be a scary thing if your field got mustard in it.

Here in Maine, as well as many parts of the eastern and northern parts of the U.S. and Canada, there is another kind of mustard: *Garlic Mustard*. This plant doesn't grow into a big bush like the kind Jesus told about. It grows about 1-2 feet high but is also extremely invasive. It has little white flowers and grows just about anywhere. Once established, it creates a monoculture, crowding out all other native species. It even affects the soil it grows in, poisoning it so that other plants are unable to grow there and it can release a toxin that is harmful to certain butterflies. So you see, mustard is not a nice friendly plant and I'm pretty sure Jesus knew that when he made up his parable about it.

So what are we, those of us in the church today, supposed to do with all of these parables that seem to suggest that this kingdom of heaven, that Jesus sought to establish, is subversive, invasive, corrupting, and eventually seeks to take over everything? It is a bit troubling, isn't it?

Well first, remember that these are parables of encouragement, meant to lift up those in the early church who were facing persecution and alienation from their own faith traditions. So we should see these stories in a positive light. The kingdom does invade, but it invades with good things. It introduces love and kindness and compassion and justice. Especially into environments that are lacking those things. Invading fields of societies where the culture oppresses the poor, poisons the earth, isolates the sick and aged, benefits some at the expense of others, allows addictions and unhealthy lifestyles to destroy lives. The church must be counter-cultural in a world that does not know the gospel.

And in a time when we in progressive Christianity seek to be especially sensitive to the concepts of inclusion and diversity, what do we do with these images of a kingdom that invades and crowds out others? Don't we want to teach tolerance of other faiths and even find points of common ground and cooperation with those of differing religious views than ours?

Yes, we do, but the basic tenets that Jesus taught, love of God and of one another, respect for others, care for the poor, sick and needy, all these things are the things we hope will invade all faiths and religions, all belief systems and lifestyles. It is not that we want to establish a monoculture of Christianity, for we know we all have much to learn from one another. But we understand that what we in the church call the Holy Spirit, works through all people, even people of other faiths, not just those who take the name Christian. Our hope is for a day when all people, all faiths will share in these basic concepts of what Christ taught.

Finally, I have to return to that supreme piece of literature I shared with you earlier. It is true that, like the little boy in the story, when we put our trust in God and seek to be part of God's realm in our world, we never really know where something is going to take us, what the future may hold for any beginning, even if it is as simple and small as a cookie, that leads to a glass of milk. In a time when we in the church have witnessed a decline, losses in membership and lessening of our influence, we need to trust in the Spirit which can take even the smallest of seeds and grow it into what is needed in our world.

We are now part of a new emerging church, something that has been planted but has yet to spring forth. In all of this, we should be reminded that God will demand our all, that we should be prepared to give our whole selves for the sake of the kingdom, and in so doing, know that we are never alone, God is with and within us, calling us forth into a future of that heavenly realm. Amen.