

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“It’s Like . . . Don’t be fooled . . . Wait for it!”

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Matthew 13:31-32

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Parables are not easy to understand. The place I began to better understand parables was when I was teaching 4-5 year olds in something called Worship and Wonder. So please, indulge me for a moment as I share with you how we taught the children about parables. (holding up a gold box) “Parables are very precious, like gold, and this box is gold. This looks like a present. Well, parables are like presents. They have already been given to us. They are already ours. There’s another reason why this might be a parable. It has a lid, and sometimes parables seem to have lids on them. But when you lift the lid of a parable, there is something very precious inside. I know, let’s take off the lid and see if this is a parable.” And then we would start with our story “Once there was someone who said such amazing things, and did such wonderful things, that people began to follow him. As they followed, he told them about a kingdom: the Kingdom of Heaven. But they did not understand. They had never been to such a place. And they didn’t know anyone who had. They didn’t even know where it was. So one day, they simply had to ask him, ‘What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?’”

³¹ Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in that one’s field; ³²it 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.”

Matthew 13:31-32

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, for we rejoice in you, O Lord.

After we began our introduction, we would open the lid and one by one pull out manipulatives and very quietly, very slowly, and worshipfully tell the parable. After telling the story, the storyteller would then ask wondering questions. Wondering seems to be a good way to tell a parable, because they are so packed with meaning. . . “new meaning for new situations.”¹ They seem to be simple, and yet obscure. There is new meaning around **every** word. And so it was, that I learned more about parables in that simple, quiet room as the children helped teach me, and God shed light for all of us on the Kingdom of Heaven. It was powerful. In fact, as I look back on it, I was experiencing the Kingdom. Seeds were planted and I didn’t recognize it, but they grew and continue to grow as I learn more and more about the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹ Boring, 299.

Sweet, huh? A sweet story about a little seed that grows into a tree so that the birds can make nests in its branches. A sweet story told in 2 verses. When I looked at the scripture I was to preach on, I thought, thanks Jay! Not a lot to go on. But don't be fooled. There is much more than meets the eye. And it may not be just a sweet little story. A little mustard seed. It is indeed small – Jesus described it as the smallest of all the seeds. And it is pretty insignificant. Or is it? A mustard seed is an annual herb² that like the crabgrass Jay talked about last week – it invades and it takes over! It gets out of control. No one wanted them in their fields. So I wonder why Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed?

One thing we must remember is that parables are not factual – they are parables – they are meant to change how we think. And the way Jesus told us this parable is that he told it as if this mustard seed grew into a large tree. But the only problem is – is that mustard seed didn't grow into a large tree – a tall bush maybe, but not a tree big enough for birds to come and build nests! So I wonder why he said that? But remember – it is a parable – it challenges our thinking – “opening a new vision of reality.”³

Reality – that is what I heard from the parable from last week – in that parable there were weeds that had been sown among the wheat. There is evil in the world because we live in a world of human kingdoms and God has given us, all of us, free will. There is hunger, there are some, actually many who don't have what they need . . . there is racism. . . there is loneliness, there is sadness and grief . . . there is power that is greedy, there are those in power who say it is wrong to disrupt the status quo and try to snuff out any other way of thinking. There was power that was corrupt when Jesus told this story to a Jewish audience. And many had experienced that greed, corrupt power even by those in religious authority who were supposed to be telling them about God. But that's why parables are so important – and that's why Jesus used parables – to change our way of thinking about what kingdoms should look like.

This parable lifts the lid and opens up a new vision of reality – It is God's reality – it helps us see a new kind of kingdom. The previous parable seemed to talk about the present human kingdom – the problem, that weeds will be able to grow among the wheat. But this parable, tells us about growth, it keeps us looking to the future⁴ and to God's activity to deal with the present situation so that we can envision a different reality – the kingdom of heaven. But things have to be shaken up! And so Jesus tells us the mustard seed grew into a tree. The tree in this parable “reflects the symbol of the imperial tree found in representations of empires, including the apocalyptic imagery of the coming kingdom of God.”⁵ Our Psalm this morning talks about that kind of imagery of the coming Kingdom of God. And that happens as the seed breaks open and a plant, a bush and then a tree grows. It may take a while, but eventually the mustard seed invades

² Boring, 309

³ Boring, 299.

⁴ Dale Allison, Jr. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-17/commentary-on-matthew-1331-33-44-52-3>.

⁵ Boring, 309.

and spreads – perhaps creating a lot of chaos, but also producing this new reality. Jesus was making visible through his life, this heavenly kingdom, where love overcomes hate and evil, and misuse of power. He was making visible where the blind would see, and those bound up, even in the human kingdom’s way of thinking, people would be set free and love would rule! He was subversive, and this new way of thinking challenges who is really in authority. Don’t be fooled – it is a small seed, but it will become great. This One who was seen to be from humble beginnings, who taught a new way of thinking about kingdoms, who talked to second-class citizens, like women and children, and lepers and tax collectors, would help us see this new kind of reign and it would be great!⁶ But for them, and for us today, we only see glimpses.

I wonder, have you seen glimpses? I am sure you have. I have. Human kingdoms tend to overlook children and see them as insignificant as that mustard seed, but the children showed me what the kingdom of heaven looked like as they began, and I began, to understand how valuable they are in the kingdom of heaven. I caught a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven when I was in that little quiet room with those children. Human kingdoms tend to tell us who is important and worthy, and who is not, but I caught a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven when the young people in a youth group at a church I served, challenged the evil reality of racism and surrounded and supported several of our youth who were African American and were frightened when people they knew and loved were being targeted with threats of violence, simply because of the color of their skin. Not only did they support their friends and loved ones, they attended Anti-Racism and Pro-Reconciliation seminars and they brought back what they had learned to our congregation so that we could begin to see how God was working through them to help us envision this new reality called the kingdom of heaven. I have caught a glimpse as I heard about a member of our staff and his wife, going overseas to help Ukrainian refugees as they escaped their present earthly reality, of war by those seeking more and more power, where weeds were growing tall, and it was hard to see the kingdom of heaven. But God had sown a seed and it invaded the earthly reality. Human kingdoms often make us think that we have to buck up and get over sadness after the death of a loved one, or a divorce, or any type of loss. But I catch glimpses of this heavenly kingdom when I hear about the Stephen Ministers reaching out to those who are lonely, or grieving, and simply listen to them and even create a worship service near Christmas that helps them feel God’s presence at such difficult times. Human kingdoms promote having more and more things to make us happy. But I have caught glimpses of this new reign when the sower sows a seed in a young person and that young person’s family, who instead of asking for the newest toy or gadget on the market, asked friends and family to donate to an after school program to meet needs of the underserved in our city, by mentoring young people, helping them with homework, offering them a meal – helping them understand they are important.

I wonder what glimpses you have seen? I am sure you have seen many glimpses, too. I pray they give us all hope, and excitement and challenge to continue to let it grow, maybe create

⁶ Boring, 309.

some chaos and take over. Because the kingdom of heaven is here now, and it is coming even in a more complete and clear reality of hope and tremendous love. We see it partially, but don't be fooled. It grows! Thank God for little mustard seeds. Thanks be to God!

Sources:

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