

May 14, 2017

WAYS THE KINGDOM GROWS

Matthew 13:31-35

“What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?” It’s a question a child might ask, sometimes, out of the blue. It might be spoken more simply as “What is Heaven like?” And it might come after a loss. A parent might have explained that “Grandma is in heaven now.” And along with the logical question of, “Where is heaven?” comes the question, “What is it like?” In Luke 17, Jesus is said to have answered the question as to the “Where?” Its context actually had to do with the question, “When?” *“Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘The Kingdom of God does not come with signs that can be observed, nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or, “There it is!” For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is within you!’”* (17:20-21)

Of course, the question of tantamount importance is actually, “How do we get there?” If “there” is “here” in our “midst,” “within us,” though, aren’t we there already? Yes... and no. That’s why we need to ask the question of the day, “What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?” What is the nature of this Kingdom that can be experienced in the midst of its fellowship, but that we cannot quite see; that is here, now, but is also future and eternal.

First of all, if the King is here, the Kingdom is in our midst! Where Christ is, there is His Kingdom. If we are the Body of Christ, then the Kingdom is, in fact, in our midst. It is in the midst of all believers. We can encounter the King, and others can experience the Kingdom with us. But it is an *us* thing, not a *me* thing. I think we all need a good understanding of what it means to be children of the Kingdom, members of the Body, and disciples in the Church. But I will reserve that for another time.

But...Jesus says the Kingdom is like a seed. In the Parable of the Soils/Sower, the seed is the “*Word of the Kingdom.*” (13:19) The Word, implanted, produces fruit. Could the Word be the sign of the Kingdom? One of the great hopes of teaching, especially when children (as well as adults) are learning about God, is that the seed that is planted will some day sprout and grow, not like a weed, but producing fruit/grain. For all the people whose parents took them to Sunday School, or, who insisted they go through Confirmation at age twelve or thirteen, though the Church may seldom see them afterwards, there is the hope that the seeds of faith were planted and will, one day, make a difference in their lives, the difference it is meant to make. That seed is the Kingdom in the midst! It can make a tremendous difference.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed. A mustard seed was the example of growth beyond proportion. You would think that the smaller the seed, the smaller the plant. But, at the time of Christ, it was considered one of “*the smallest of seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree.*” (Matthew 13:32) Of course, since then, we have learned differently. But the point to be made is this: the possibility for growth is immense. The vision is not of a forest of various types of trees, but of a single tree with various birds making nests in its branches. We should not imagine a possibility of a variety of truths, all providing a foundation for everyone, but of a single source of truth. A single tree of life!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a planted seed, able to show great growth. Something small becoming very large. But...it is also like yeast, or, leaven. *A little leaven leavens the whole lump.* (Galatians 5:9) Women would always reserve a little yeast, or, leavened dough from the bread they made and mix it with a new batch of flour in order for the dough to rise again for the next day’s bread. Not to save some leavened dough was to break the cycle of daily bread. This gives special meaning to the phrase of The Lord’s Prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread*, because today’s bread would be made with a little lump of yesterday’s dough!

But the real issue with respect to the image of yeast is the silent inner change that comes to the flour because of the yeast. It is not instantaneous, but the dough does change overnight. You might not

see it if you watch it, but there is a difference. When we begin to believe, the Holy Spirit begins to dwell in us. *Our bodies are temples for the Spirit of God.* (1 Corinthians 6:19) Our character is changed by the Spirit of Truth. Our lives are transformed by Christ in us. But the difference between us and the flour is that we can resist that change. The flour does nothing and it is changed. It simply lets the yeast do its work. Sometimes, we too, need to *let* the Spirit do its work.

It's like the branch's abiding in the vine. It does not produce fruit by pushing or straining. It simply abides. (John 15:5) Perhaps, with some people, rather than push them, we simply need to just let them abide. The fruit will ripen in its own time. The Kingdom is in the midst. But, many scholars see the image of yeast as being the influence of the Body of believers over the whole community. The moral foundation of faith exemplified by the Church influences society in such a way that society is changed. (Or, supposed to change!) It would be true if only this was our actual experience. I think, in today's culture, society is influencing the Church too much.

John Wesley said that there is no holiness but social holiness. It is nice to be a piece of altered dough, transformed by the Spirit, inspired by grace; but every individual Christian is meant to be a maker of other disciples. We should never rest content that we might arrive at the threshold of the Kingdom of God...alone. We need to remember that *"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you!"* (Matthew 17:20)

The *alone* issue is a difficult one. Many people feel that the Kingdom of Heaven is in their future simply because they are believers. They think they don't need to be a part of The Body, the Church. But, in Luke 17, when Jesus says, the Kingdom of God is within you, that you is plural! Hence, no holiness but social holiness. Some people might be disappointed when they get to heaven and discover that there are others there! The Kingdom of Heaven grows in two ways: outwardly, the way a tree grows, and, inwardly, the way yeast leavens the dough. How have you grown lately? How is our part of The Body of Christ growing? The reality is that it is *meant* to grow!

Notice that Matthew mentions that Jesus taught nothing that was not in parable. (13:34) I spoke about *Why* Jesus spoke in parables back before Lent began. Here, Matthew adds to what was said back in verses 10-17 (of Chapter 13) by saying that Jesus was fulfilling something written in Psalm 78, *"I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundations of the world."* (Matthew 13:35) The problem with parables is that they don't always reveal anything that had been hidden. Just the same, a parable has a way of saying something without really saying it. To say that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a tiny seed, is to say that it will grow. To say that it is like leaven, is to say that it will cause change. These things are true, and obvious. Lesson learned. But what truth is hidden, and what is being revealed? If there is anything hidden, it is that it seems virtually unnoticeable at first. In Chapter 16, Matthew tells of Jesus saying, *"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees..."* (6-12) At the end of this passage, the Disciples understand that He had been speaking about *"the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* What you are taught can affect the way you think. True. But...to be told to beware of certain teachers and their teaching implies that they are teaching things that are not completely true. The Kingdom of Heaven will grow...the way a mustard seed can grow...into a great tree, without our *expecting* it to do so. The Kingdom of Heaven will grow...the way leaven causes dough to rise from within; without our really knowing *how*. These are a few of the hidden realities of the Kingdom. *The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seeds on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how!* (Mark 4:26-37) The Truth might even happen without any effort of our own!

Is the Truth hidden, though? It may only seem that way before it is understood. There are things we don't know until new are taught. And once we've been taught, we are more aware of the Truth. The Truth was always there, but the difference is that, now, we know it!

Know this: The Truth will work on you. And... You are a seed. You are leaven. You can grow, and you can bring change....sometimes, just by your presence!