

sermon-7/24/11 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Perplexing Parables of the Kingdom”
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Today we have been given a smorgasbord of parables about the kingdom of God. And they are all weird, or at least slightly off kilter. Cynthia Jarvis, a Presbyterian pastor in Pennsylvania, says that God is the “Holy Trickster.” God often seems to come to us in surprising ways, sometimes seemingly out of left field. These parables are a prime example of this. They are anything but straightforward.

Let’s look at a few of them. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. This seed grows into a large plant. The mustard bush was not something farmers wanted to see. It was the trash plant of that day. One commentator called it the kudzu of the ancient world. It was an invasive plant farmers wanted to eradicate.

The fact that the mustard seed grows into a great shrub hardly inspires confidence. If Jesus talked about an acorn growing into a mighty oak tree, that would be impressive. But, no, he talks about a little seed growing into a shrub.

Will Willimon says this would be like a conference pastor coming to a church wanting to encourage them. So he says to them, “This church is doing great. When you speak, your voice is like the roar of a huge mouse.” Was Jesus just trying to lower expectations about the kingdom?

Then there is the parable of the leaven in the bread causing the bread to rise. Biblically, leaven was mostly seen as a corrupting influence. It was often used in a negative way, kind of like saying a rotten apple spoils the whole barrel. Remember when Jews celebrate the Passover they use unleavened bread. For Jesus to say the kingdom is like leaven would have left his hearers scratching their heads.

Perhaps the weirdest of all is the parable of the day laborer finding a treasure in the field of the rich farmer for whom he worked. Instead of going to the farmer and letting him know what he found in his field, he buries it. Then he sells everything he has to buy that field. This was unethical behavior at best. One commentator said if the issue was finders/keepers, then he would not have had to buy the field. But it is not. He needs to hide the treasure from the farmer so he can buy the field and basically steal the treasure from the rightful owner. Peculiar.

What is Jesus trying to do here? Obviously he is trying to get the crowds, at first, and then his disciples, next, to look at God’s kingdom from a fresh perspective. One has to give up conventional thinking to see how Jesus looks at the world and what he wants from his disciples.

One scholar, in trying to explain why Jesus would use what was normally seen as a corrupting element as a way to describe the kingdom of God, says, “If a person is well-adjusted in a sick society, corrupting is the only path to wholeness.”

Jesus does not want his disciples to be well-adjusted to an unjust world. He does not want them to feel at home in a world where the poor are exploited, where women are denigrated, where

violence is seen as the only way to bring about change, and where security is the result of accumulating a bunch of stuff. It is far better to be mal-adjusted to that world. Being a Christian in God's kingdom requires us to be willing to be out of step with the sick parts of our culture.

In order to get this point across, Jesus comes up with a variety of parables that almost anyone could relate to. These parables invite us to see the world through the actions of many different characters including: a farmer, a woman, a day-laborer, a merchant, a fisherman, and a scribe.

The mustard seed parable is rich in its possibilities, in what it causes us to ponder. As one commentator notes, this parable forces us to look at the unexpected ways God's kingdom intrudes on our lives. He writes, "God invades our orderly sense of things." God's kingdom is like a mustard seed in a sack of good seed. Or as another commentator put it, "If God can use mustard seed and corrupt leaven to grow the kingdom imagine what God can do with (us)."

The image of the kingdom being like a large shrub is also strangely comforting. God's kingdom may not look like much on the surface. One scholar says that for some it is easier to believe in the reality of the resurrection than it is to believe the Church is the place where the Christ is to be present to the world.

Jesus says, don't let the seeming inadequacy of things on the surface fool you. Some pretty amazing things can happen even if something looks insignificant. God uses ordinary realities to do big things. That ought to give most churches hope. Most churches are not large. The Church has become marginalized in our world, especially in the Northwest. We are seen as irrelevant. It is easy to feel like a shrub among mighty trees that seem to garner all the press.

But, says Jesus, God loves to work in the ordinary parts of our lives. Rarely do most of us experience God's presence in a miracle, in made for television moments. More often God comes to us in a word of encouragement spoken to us by a friend, in the quiet witness of women in black standing on the corner of a downtown street, as we help feed a meal to the homeless. We dare not underestimate the power of little, ordinary events or gestures to make a huge difference in individual lives or in a society. In 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, the South was changed forever by that little action.

Finally, the parables of the treasure found in the field and the pearl of great worth call us to think about what we value most, what is so important we would sell everything to possess it. Our culture wants to tell us what has worth. Jesus says think about what is truly worth everything.

Desmond Tutu, in speaking about the value of the kingdom of God once said, "When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray.' When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal."

That quote did not end as I, and is suspect you, expected it to end. But the truth of that statement was proved when South Africa finally threw off apartheid. One would have expected a whole lot of violence in that transfer of power from the brutality of apartheid to the rule of those who were being oppressed. But that revolution was mostly non-violent. Could the fact that some of the

leaders had studied the Bible, and treasured the values of that book, have made a difference? I suspect it did.

Jesus ends these parables with the parable of the fishermen catching good and bad fish. The angels come to separate the good from the bad. We need not take this literally. Jesus was not urging us to go and steal from the rich in his parable of the treasure in the field. I don't think we need to see some people ending in the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth in a literal way either.

But we can, as one scholar tells us, see that Jesus is trying to say this living in the kingdom is not some game we can take or leave. The life of discipleship, of being fit for God's kingdom, is of ultimate importance. In our violent world where greed, fear, and partisan politics have run amok, there is a great need for mal-adjusted disciples that live by a different set of norms. May these parables of the kingdom shake us up from our business as usual approach to life. May they call us to live a life fit for God's kingdom. Amen