

It Starts Small

Revelation 22:1-5 Matthew 13:31-33

When we study the parables, especially the parables of Matthew 13, we're talking about the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom is not something that we go to in the sweet by and by when we die. It's here and now. When Jesus appeared on the scene his first words are, "the Kingdom of God is at hand." And in another place he said, "The Kingdom of God is among you."

What *is* the Kingdom of heaven? That's really what we explore when we study the parables—as Jesus gives us one image after another, perhaps in slide show fashion ("the kingdom of heaven is like this..." "the kingdom of heaven is like this..." "the kingdom of heaven is like this..." Or maybe it's more of a mural he's painting, with many and varied aspects to the overall scene. Or a quilt he's stitching together, one section at a time until we see the big picture of the Kingdom of heaven.

Remember, by telling parables, Jesus is inviting us deeper into the mystery of the Kingdom, but he is also inviting us to reflect on the questions that the parables ask of us, and then of our response to the Kingdom.

Here are two short parables this morning. Little parables with large meaning...

31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his 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.'

33 He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

This is the word of the Lord.

In these short parables Jesus uses examples from everyday life about something that starts little, and hidden, and grows large. He didn't use an image about something massive and obvious. "The kingdom of heaven is like the Andromeda Nebula galaxy." The Kingdom, Jesus is saying, starts with the little, the small, the hidden, the undetected. Small seeds growing into large shrubs. Yeast hiding itself in dough and causing it to rise. This seems to be how God operates. These parables reveal the way God has consistently worked.

Tom Sine, in his book *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, called this the "conspiracy of the insignificant." As we read through Scripture we see that God most often acted through the lowly, the unassuming, the small, the undetected, the insignificant (or what seemed insignificant).

He chose a humble couple—Abraham and Sarah—to become the parents of a new people. On more than one occasion God chose a relatively small group of soldiers to confront a vast army—think Jericho, and Gideon (Judges 7) where God pared down his soldiers to just a few. The Lord says to Gideon, “the troops are too many; if they win, they’ll take credit and forget me.” So God whittles down the number of troops.

God chose a youngest son, an undersized shepherd boy with a slingshot to defeat a well-armed giant, who then became a beloved leader of his people.

And God chose a *young peasant girl* to bear his son Jesus into the world. **And**, God chose to **send** his Messiah into the world *vulnerably*, in the form of a baby born into poverty, and in obscurity. Not exactly a spectacular way for the Son of God to make his entrance onto the stage of human history.

God chooses to start small, or with things hidden, and insignificant. **We** like to start things big. The *grand opening*, and the like. “Go big or go home!” is a phrase that was used a lot in recent years, in a variety of contexts. Including churches! Churches sometimes attempt the big program or event that’s going to bring them in.

I remember being part of a church years ago that was making big plans, was going to “win the world for Jesus” (another phrase that got used a lot in years gone by). A wise elder on Session asked for a pause, and then said: “How about we love our neighbor first? That might be a good place to start.”

And that reminded me of something our college pastor used to tell us students. Of the many beneficial things I learned from him, one of them is this: the person right in front of you is the most important person to God at that present moment. A person whom God loves unconditionally. Be willing to let your love be simple, quiet, and sincere (that’s what makes it powerful).

The Kingdom comes to us—to the world—in small ways, hidden ways, unexpected ways. It’s not spectacular or obvious. To use Jesus’ images, it’s a very small seed planted in the ground that eventually grows; it’s yeast mixed into dough which causes it to rise. You don’t see it, but it has its effect.

And I’d like to pause for a moment for us to reflect: what do we think about that? I wondered this week what the people sitting on the shore thought of this as Jesus told these stories. The Kingdom begins small? Really? Isn’t it a little more exciting than that? A little grander and more impactful, at least in the short term? I mean, seeds take a long time to grow into shrubs or trees—

sometimes past the lifetime of the person who planted the seed/seedling. Yeast takes a while to leaven the dough. That takes patience, and waiting... Yup.

Yet, while patience and waiting and hiddenness and smallness are part of the deal, the encouragement in these parables, and in God's methodology, is that what is small doesn't stay small. What seems insignificant *becomes* significant, what begins hidden is *revealed*, what starts small *grows*. There is a movement from little to large over time (and I think it's the "over time" part that is a challenge to us who like quick fixes and instant success). We see this movement in our parables, and we see this throughout Scripture. I was even thinking about this in terms of how the Bible itself begins and how it ends: from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

In Genesis God creates the world and places the first humans in the garden. It's simple and pristine. If we fast forward to the end, we see that the garden has become a city. At the end of time when Jesus has won the final victory we don't return to the garden of Eden. We enter into this heavenly cosmopolitan. Where there is rich culture from every people group, and it's interesting and diverse. The tree of life is still there; the river of life is still there. But the garden has

become a city; it's grown and developed into something beautiful. It's pristine again, but it's not the same place. It has changed.

What began small and simple became large, and diverse. And while we're living this life on earth, that seems to be how God operates in bringing his kingdom come.

The very small mustard seed becomes a large shrub which Jesus says grows into a tree—which isn't literally true, it's a figure of speech and a reference to passages in Old Testament books like Ezekiel and Daniel which speak of a seed growing into a tree where all the nations of the world come and find peace and rest in its leaves and branches (the birds of the air in Jesus' parable are probably an allusion to the nations, from those old testament images). And we see this confirmed in the vision of heaven that Cathy read for us, where that tree remains, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. How cool is that? We could use that healing right now, couldn't we?

So, the small seed becomes a large shrub; the little bit of yeast mixes in a large amount of flour in Jesus' parable and is successful in making it rise. Jesus' point: a little bit can have large effect.

And that's also what Jesus is trying to get across here: seeds and yeast are both small, *but inherently powerful*. A seed sprouts and grows; no one can *make* that happen. Yeast, once mixed in, causes the dough to rise; no one can *make* that happen. They have the power inherently to do what they are supposed to do. The Kingdom of heaven is like that.

Our job is to sow seeds. In today's parables it's seems clear to me that human agency is important here in sowing or planting seeds, and in working the yeast into the dough, and then letting them do their thing.

Because God is powerful, the Word is powerful, the Kingdom is powerful in and of itself, to accomplish its purposes.

Little becomes large, by God's power.

In 1Cor.3:6 the apostle Paul is addressing leadership issues in the church, and the unnecessary competition over who gets the credit for the success and growth of the early church and which apostle wins the popularity contest among the people. Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

So, here again is God's power to bring growth—it can't be manufactured. But the early apostles did things. They were partners and participants in God's work. And they were encouraging God's people to be partners and participants in God's work too. Doing good, and then trusting God for outcomes, like we talked about last week.

So, we have things to do, but we should never be discouraged by thinking we can only do a little bit, or play a small part. In fact, we should be greatly *encouraged* that doing a little thing is exactly what we're supposed to do! I think that's the point here.

The Kingdom begins small, and that's encouraging to us because it means that every little act of love, relying on God's power, matters. Every kind word, every simple act of mercy, every small sacrifice we make, God can use and transform by his power into something useful and beautiful for the Kingdom. And every act of faith on our own behalf... of praying, of seeking God's will, of overcoming fears and taking risks, every time we trust God in some small way, can generate growth *in us*. And we are blessed, even as we are being a blessing.

Story told by pastor Russell Conwell. It's a story that took place in 1886. And it's about a little girl, 8 years old, from his church, Grace Baptist Church in

Philadelphia, PA. This 8 year old girl's name was Hattie May Wiatt. She lived near the church where a school was meeting, and the school was very crowded and could not hold all the children who wanted to attend. So the pastor told the congregation that he dreamed that one day they would have enough space to allow every child to attend the school who wanted to.

Well, a few months later, Hattie May Wiatt became very sick and sadly, she died. Pastor Conwell was asked to do the funeral and the little girl's mother told him that Hattie May had been saving money to help expand the church's facility, and she gave him the little purse in which she had saved 57 cents. Think about it, 57 cents in 1886 is a lot of money for a little girl to save! There were some pennies, nickels and dimes.

Rev. Conwell had the 57 cents turned into 57 pennies, told the congregation the story of little Hattie May and sold the pennies for a return of about \$250. Basically, he auctioned them off and raised \$250.

Some of the members of the church then formed what they called the Wiatt Mite (m-i-t-e) Society which was dedicated to making Hattie May's 57 cents grow as much as possible and to buy some property for them to house their school. A house nearby was purchased with the \$250 that Hattie May's 57 cents had produced and the rest is history. The first classes of Temple College, later

Temple University, were held in that house. The house was later sold to allow Temple College to move, and the growth of Temple University, along with the founding of the Good Samaritan Hospital (which is now the Temple University Hospital) have been powerful testimonies to Hattie May Wiatt's dream.

The Bible says, "And a little child shall lead them." And now, tens of thousands of young men and women are getting a college education in inner city Philadelphia, because of a little girl with a dream, a few pennies, nickels and dimes, and a desire to help grow God's Kingdom through education.

This is how it works with God. In the smallness, the quietness, the little things. Seeds are planted; yeast is worked into some dough. And it grows and produces fruit.

Mother Teresa: we can't all do great things, but we can all do small things with great love and power.

In the Bulb There is a Flower