

# The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

## Part 3—Life in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:31-33

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ January 15, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it 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[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”(Matthew 13:31-33, NRSV)



As most of you know, this month I returned from a 3 month sabbatical from my ministry here at Faith. It was an extraordinary time. Part of what I got to do during that period was to travel with Lena. Over the course of three weeks we visited Greece and the Netherlands...and it actually felt a little bit like time travel.

We spent a few days in Athens and toured many ruins and museums that reminded us of the classical period of Greek history; those 200 years in the 5th and 4th centuries BC that were a pinnacle for architecture, art, philosophy, poetry, & drama. Greek civilization of that day claims to have given birth to democracy itself. *an extraordinary time in our world.*

We also spent time in the Netherlands, especially in Amsterdam. There we saw the remnants of a Dutch Golden Age, a time in the 17th century, when Dutch trade, science, military, and art were among the most acclaimed in the world. This was a culture that was a maritime power and where merchants rather than nobles stood at the top of the social and political structure. *It was an extraordinary time in our world.*

Along with you, we also spent time moving through this election season in our nation. Together we yearned for something great, something strong, something powerful, something huge. All of us looked, prayed, and voted for someone to restore our fortunes, our jobs, our dignity, our morality, our justice, our hope.

According to one report, presidential candidates and super PACs raised \$1,925 million dollars for this campaign.<sup>1</sup> Close to 2 billion dollars were spent seeking the highest office in the land. *It was an extraordinary time in our nation and world.*

So you can see why I'm disappointed this morning. In the wake of all this excitement, (even the Cubs won the World Series!), I get three measly verses to preach on! The stories we heard today in scripture couldn't be more ordinary!

But maybe it's appropriate. We have just left the excitement of the season of Advent. We've come through the 12 days of Christmas. We've seen the star and traveled with the Magi on the day of Epiphany. But we are now in the season that for centuries the church has called "Ordinary Time." Today is actually the First Sunday of Ordinary Time. So maybe it is best to start with ordinary stories.

At first blush, it seems like conversation about God's kingdom should be about something dramatic, something flashy, something newsworthy, something earthshaking. But here all we get is a farmer with some tiny seeds and a baker with some leaven and flour. Trust me, no one will be tweeting today about these stories!

Yet maybe there is something happening here that we have missed. Perhaps there is more than meets the eye in these simple scenes.

Today we consider two short parables. Sometimes referred to as the "Parables of Growth," they are known as the "Parable of the Mustard Seed," and the "Parable of the Leaven." Like many of the parables we are considering over these next few weeks, Jesus begins by saying "The kingdom of heaven is like..." , "...like a mustard seed..." , "...like yeast..."

To begin, I want to remind you of something I am sure Jeff has already pointed out. When Jesus is talking about "the kingdom of heaven," he is NOT talking about the afterlife! When Jesus says "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" he is referring to that place and time and occasion where God rules, where God reigns. In this passage (and in our day), he is talking about the present—right here, right now. The kingdom of God is present (maybe not fully) right here, right now. So maybe, if we pay attention to ordinary things like mustard seed and the leaven, we can notice more about God's kingdom all around us.

When rabbis in Jesus' day wanted to talk about something small, they talked about mustard seeds. If you gathered together about 750 mustard seeds they would weigh one gram.<sup>2</sup> Pretty small. Now if you and I were telling this story – we would describe this tiny mustard seed growing into tree the size of a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/raised-summ>

<sup>2</sup> *The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, Frederick Dale Bruner, pp.33-39.

huge oak or a giant redwood. You see, again, we are impressed with bigness, with the extraordinary. We want to describe the God's kingdom as gigantic and powerful.

*But not Jesus.* In this Gospel he says that the seed becomes the “greatest of all shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” A shrub! The plant will get six, maybe 12 feet high – in rare cases 15.

Jesus is NOT saying that seed will produce a kingdom that is huge and obvious. What he does want us to notice is the contrast between the tiny seed and the big bush. This parable and the following one point us to what one person calls, “littleness of the means and the largeness of the end.”<sup>3</sup> God uses small, almost imperceptible ways to do the work of the kingdom. Remember, Jesus says the kingdom is like the seed—he doesn't say that it is like the bush. Clearly – if we want to see the work of the kingdom – we will have to pay attention to the small & ordinary.

The story of the leaven builds on this same idea. Those of you who are bakers know that it doesn't take much leaven, much yeast, to trigger the rising process in bread. The story again points to the contrast between what we begin with and the amount we end with.

In the case of this parable, the transformation is a bit more dramatic. The “large amount” referenced in the text is actually about 40 pounds of flour in which to mix the leaven, according to one writer, “enough to feed forty people three meals a day for several days.”<sup>4</sup> Lots of bread. *Makes my mouth water.*

Another thing to notice about the yeast is that once you get it going, it does its work on its own. You don't need to do anything. You just need to wait. Sometimes we think God needs our help– but maybe, like the leaven—God's kingdom is coming whether we help or not. *Just as we know the yeast will do its work, we can be confident that God can bring the kingdom with or without us.* That's good to know in these days of fear and failure. Its good to know when we start thinking that everything depends on us.

Another observation about the leaven, Once you mix it into the dough – it is impossible to remove it. Once it dissolves into the baking ingredients you cannot even see it as a separate element. You might be able to plant mustard seeds and go to the excruciating work of removing them from the soil, but no way could you remove the yeast from the dough.

So what might this tell us about God's kingdom? What does the yeast in the dough suggest about God's work in our time and place? Let me quote a man who is a priest and a writer,

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<sup>3</sup> Bruner, pp.33-39.

<sup>4</sup> Bruner, pp.33-39.

*...just as the yeast, once it is in the dough it is so intimate a part of the lump as to be indistinguishable from it, undiscoverable in it, and irretrievable out of it, so is the kingdom in this world.<sup>5</sup>*

The leaven teaches us that God's kingdom is here – God's kingdom is working. We can trust that. We are simply invited to find God in the world. We are invited to align ourselves with that work.

There is another important thing Jesus says in today's readings. At the beginning of the parable of the leaven/yeast we are told in one translation:

*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and **mixed** into a large amount of flour...*<sup>6</sup>

But that translation really does not do justice to this parable. The literal reading tells us that the baker woman did not just "mix" the yeast into the flour – but she "hid" it in the dough. It is as if this baker woman God is *secretly* doing her good work. *Sometimes the work of God is hidden from our view.* Yet another way God's work avoids the extraordinary.

As if to underline this Jesus makes a proclamation in verse 35 to conclude his telling of these two parables:

*I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.<sup>7</sup>*

*The work of God in our world is certain. The kingdom of God is among us. Yet sometimes it is hidden from our view. It is ordinary, it is hidden, but it is important.*

One final thing about these parables. Notice at the end of the first parable Jesus talks about birds coming to nest in the branches of the bush/tree. Jesus here is mirroring a common picture of the end of time when like birds flocking to a tree, all people would come to the Lord, all people would come to God's heavenly banquet. At the end of the second parable, Jesus comments that the leaven will affect the "whole" amount for flour. The New Revised Standard Version says until "all of it is leavened."

Both parables end with a clear statement that the kingdom of God is not the exclusive possession of a small, select religious group, but that somehow God's kingdom will impact the whole world and all its people. Christ is not inviting us into some religious club, but into the transformation of all creation!

Last week Lena and I saw a movie called "Hidden Figures." It is a remarkable film that is at the same time both personal and political. Set in 1962 against the backdrop of the space race between the

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<sup>5</sup> *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Robert Farrar Capon, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:33, *NRSV*.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 13:35, *NRSV*.

United States and the Soviet Union, it is fully immersed in the Civil Rights battles against Jim Crow laws and racist practices of that day. “Hidden Figures” tells the story of three African-American women who lived in the segregated South while working on NASA’s first manned space missions.

These women were well educated mathematicians (some became engineers) and one, Katherine Johnson, was a prodigy with an extraordinary ability for doing mathematical calculations in her head. In fact, these women along with their many black colleagues working in a building on the periphery of NASA’s Virginia Headquarters were all called “computers,” well before IBM came on the scene with electronic mainframes.

When astronaut John Glenn was getting ready to become the first American to orbit the Earth, calculations for his re-entry into the atmosphere required an urgent adjustment that electronic computers couldn’t agree upon. Glenn knew whom to ask for: “the smart one,” he says of Katherine Johnson, She is called on to do the calculation and gets it exactly right—both in the film and in real life in that room in Langley Virginia in 1962.

Yet for all the abilities, talent and genius of Johnson and her colleagues, the film shows how these black women are frequently and routinely subjected to the humiliation, insults, and cruelty that were the common lot of black Americans in those days of segregation.<sup>8</sup> One wonders if much has changed.

Yet these women were seeds, they were leaven, that were hidden away. They emerged to help put an American into orbit and more importantly to help us all break free, even in some small way, from racist attitudes and practices of that day.

As I wrote this sermon, I couldn’t help but think how extraordinary this week is. Monday is the day we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Today is his actual birthday - he would be 88 years old.) Few would argue that Dr. King is one of the most important figures of our lives if not all history.

Later in the week, we will see another important event. On Friday, January 20, 2017 we will witness the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Though among us here we might carry many views of Mr. Trump and his administration—in the wake of our tumultuous and painful election season, few of us are indifferent to what this transition might mean.

On one hand, the parables we read today remind me that no president can bring or prevent the kingdom. No dramatic happenings on a national stage can stop the leaven of God’s work. No laws enacted or protests staged can substitute for the seeds of God’s reign. Yet, I also believe God has something to do with history & politics. God has chosen though all of time to be involved with people and all that we do.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken liberally from Bill Moyers' article referencing the movie: <http://billmoyers.com/story/hidden-figures-jeff-sessions-wants-keep-shadows/>

So perhaps that is where these parables help us. Few of us have the wealth, time or skill for bold and powerful gestures. Not many things we do will be huge. But if we believe that God works in us and that we are encouraged to join in the work of God's kingdom, perhaps our small faithful acts are God's seed and God's leaven in the world.

I like the words of Dr. King from one of his sermons<sup>9</sup>:

*If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.*

*I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.*

King, the preacher and leader, found power in the ordinary.

What I would really love to do today is tell what to do and think as citizens of this nation. You see, my beliefs are just as passionate as yours. But I think what God wants me to do from this pulpit is very different. *I believe Jesus asks all of us to see if our values, actions, and attitudes are aligned with God's kingdom.* You see, we are invited into the work of God most powerfully expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus. So whatever we do this week, however we respond to the world around us, *may we all resist or rejoice based on God's work in us. May we all critique or celebrate in response to the movement of God's Spirit.*

God's kingdom rises above partisanship. God is neither Democrat, nor Republican, Libertarian. God does not belong to the Tea Party or Green Party. God's kingdom is not an American kingdom.

God is at work in each one of us. The farmer's seeds will sprout and the baker woman's bread will rise in our world. So look around—look at the ordinary. Look at the small. Look for what is hidden. Discover God's presence woven into the fabric of all life. Find those places where people are called together in love and justice.

For the good news is this—we will see God's Kingdom. The even better news is this—God is calling and empowering every one of us as agents of God's reign. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church>

### Next Step Questions:

1. Growing seeds and rising bread are quite ordinary actions. In what “ordinary” or “small” ways do you see God at work in our world?
2. Read Matthew 13:31-33 again. What do you notice here? What puzzles you? What challenges you or makes you question?
3. The parable implies that God’s work is hidden—and happens without our noticing—and maybe without our involvement at all. How does it make you feel to know that God’s kingdom work can/will happen without you?
4. Once leaven/yeast begins to do its work in flour, it is nearly impossible to separate it from or see it in the dough. Can we really see the work of God’s kingdom in our world? Is God’s kingdom present (even in some small way) everywhere in the world?
5. Bible scholar Dale Bruner comments that these parables teach us about the contrast between the “littleness of the means and the largeness of the end.” In other words, the insignificant, unsensational work of the Gospel can have dramatic results. Can you describe something like this in your own experience? Are your expectations for God small or large?
6. We are in a time of both change and struggle in our nation right now. Where do you see the presence of God’s kingdom (God’s rule) in all of this?
7. Dr. Martin Luther King commented in one of his sermons that he didn’t want to be remembered for awards and accolades but for the ordinary (but powerful) things like feeding the hungry and visiting the prisoner—work that God was doing in him. Is there something you think that God is doing in you to bring about God’s kingdom?