

The Inconspicuous Overwhelming Kingdom of God Among Us

Luke 13:18-21

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 9, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹⁸ He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

²⁰ And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Luke 13:18-21, NRSV)

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So I'm sitting at the light at Florin and Gloria a few weeks ago, just down the street from here, and the light is red as lights inevitably seem to be whenever I'm late for a meeting, which I was. I'm watching the green light to my right waiting for it to turn yellow for the cross traffic so I can hit the gas the moment it's my turn. Even though there is literally nobody else around, no traffic coming from either direction, the light stays green for at least 45 seconds – a lifetime in that moment. Then, when it finally does turn yellow and then to red, the strangest thing happens. The empty lanes directly across from me get a green light but my light stays red. It was my turn to go. I'm the only one at the intersection. And my light is the only one that refuses to turn green. Eventually that light turns red. Certainly, I tell myself, I will be next. But no, the cross traffic light turns green again for those still empty lanes! Again!

By this time I'm losing it. I'm backing up my truck, back and forth over the crosswalk wondering if maybe I didn't trip the sensor. I'm weighing the potential consequences of blatantly running a red light a block from the church of which I'm pastor. How could it not be my turn? And as another 45 seconds tick by – I know this because I counted them! – I feel myself becoming increasingly agitated. Not just impatient, but angry. I was angry at a red light which was making me a few more minutes late to a meeting which, to be honest, I can't even remember now what it was about.

Pay attention to those moments in life when you become impatient and angry. Nearly every single time, this is what is happening: You are not getting what you want. In the same way a child throws a fit in a grocery store because her mom won't buy her the breakfast cereal she wants, we become angry when things, even trivial things, don't go our way. And that's a problem

because it's very common in life for things not to go our way.

You see, I live in a little kingdom where I am sovereign king, a range where my will is effective in this world. I chose this shirt this morning. I could have chosen the red one, but I went with this one. I'm king over that decision. That's my domain. I'm going to a potluck for lunch later today and I will get to choose what items in the potluck I sample. I'm king over what I eat. My kingdom, my rule and reign, my effective will, however, is frustratingly limited. For all the things I can control, there is so much more that is out of my control. I can't control traffic lights. I wish I could; I can't. I can't control diseases which affect people I love and which may affect me some day. I can't control other people. I can't control so many of the circumstances around me. To a large extent, I even find it hard to even control my own behavior, motives, instincts and emotions. There is much in me that I wish was not in me. There are so many limits to the boundaries of my little kingdom.

The Bible speaks often about the fact that God has a kingdom as well. Just like me, God's kingdom is the range of his effective will¹, that in existence which aligns with what God wants. Sometimes God's Kingdom is also called the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven, then, is the reality over which God is king, over which he is sovereign. In heaven, things go the way God wants them to go. Follow me?

Now, there are two main differences between God's Kingdom and my kingdom. First, God's Kingdom is much, much greater in scope, the range of his effective will extending far, far beyond my own. Second, in the Kingdom of Heaven God's will is never frustrated. There are no red lights for God in heaven, holding him back from doing what he wants to do or going where he wants to go. Isaiah 14:27 declares, “**For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?**”²

So why is it that we look all around the world, this world which we believe belongs to God, and we see all sorts of things going on that are clearly not God's will?

¹ This is the way Dallas Willard describes God's Kingdom. See *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 25-27.

² NIV

That's a good question, right? It cannot be God's will for a fire to destroy an entire community and take the lives of dozens and dozens of people. It cannot be God's will for a gunman to burst into a synagogue and kill eleven of those worshipping there. It cannot be God's will that disease infects the bodies and prematurely ends the lives of those we love. So what's happening? Is God's Kingdom under siege? Are his boundaries eroding?

Remember in Genesis when God made the world and declared, when it was all done, that all of it was very good.³ In that moment heaven and earth were essentially one. The range of God's effective will stretched out to include all of creation. In the beginning everything existed just as God wanted it to exist. And God, in his wisdom and grace, set human beings, Adam and Eve, to live as his representatives, his stewards, on the earth. God blessed them, remember, and said to them, **“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”**⁴ Humanity, you see, was from the very beginning invited by God to share in the rule and reign of his kingdom, to join God in seeing his will carried out throughout all the world.

But what happened? You know what happened. We rejected our role as stewards because we wanted to be royalty instead. We wanted to rule, to be in the place of God, to do things our way, to extend our effective will far beyond where God had said it ought to extend. And when that happened, when sin entered into the hearts of humanity, everything went off track. Humanity, and along with humanity all of creation, was corrupted, infected by sin, evil and death. In Romans 8 Paul says that **“creation was subjected to frustration”** and **“in bondage to decay”** as a result of human sin.⁵ There is certainly no shortage of evidence for this today. Every part of our world is, in some way, tainted.

But the thing is, God loves this world. He always has and always will. And so when the time was right God sent his only Son into the world. Christ came as one of us at Christmas. In time he offered his life on the cross, effectively paying the price for all human sin. When he then rose from the grave three days later he conquered death. In doing so, God's Kingdom, heaven itself, broke back into earth. Remember the first public words Jesus spoke? **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God [the range of God's effective will] has come near;**

repent, and believe in the good news.”⁶ You see, in Christ things on earth have now begun to align once again with God's will. It's a battle still of course, because sin, and death and evil do not relinquish territory easily, but now it's only a matter of time. And when Christ returns one day like refining fire, all that is against God will be burned up while what is left will be purified like gold that has passed through a furnace. In time, heaven and earth will be one again. As the prophet Habakkuk wrote, **“The earth [in that day] will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”**⁷ Everything will be once again and forever as God wants it all to be because of what Jesus Christ has done. Is this not the hope of the Gospel?

So what is heaven like? It would be good to know what the Kingdom of God looks like so that we can recognize it in our midst. Well fortunately for us, Jesus spoke often about the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven, he said, is like a lavish wedding feast filled with unexpected guests.⁸ The Kingdom of Heaven is like a great harvest where the weeds and the wheat are separated from one another.⁹ The Kingdom of Heaven is like a generous king who forgives the enormous debts of his subjects and then expects them to do likewise with one another.¹⁰ It's like a priceless treasure found in a field, a pearl of extraordinary value that comes into your possession, a net thrown into the sea that catches every sort of fish.¹¹ The Kingdom of Heaven is like a vineyard owner who hires workers at various times throughout the day but then pays them all the same wage at quitting time.¹² The Kingdom of Heaven is like a shepherd who separates his sheep from his goats in the evening when he brings them in from the pasture.¹³

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like man who plants a mustard seed. 750 mustard seeds weigh about one gram. It's a very tiny seed. But if you plant that tiny seed in the soil, in time it will grow into a tree as tall as six feet, ten feet, even fourteen feet! A mustard tree is so big and so full of many more seeds, that all sorts of birds from all over the place will eventually come and make their home in its branches. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, the Kingdom which is now breaking into our world all around us.

⁶ Mark 1:15 (NRSV)

⁷ Habakkuk 2:14 (NIV)

⁸ Matthew 22:1-14

⁹ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

¹⁰ Matthew 18:23-35

¹¹ Matthew 13:44-50

¹² Matthew 20:1-16

¹³ Matthew 25:31-46

³ See Genesis 1:31

⁴ Genesis 1:28 (NRSV)

⁵ See Romans 8:19-22

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a woman kneading dough. She takes a little yeast and mixes it in with three measures of flour. That's about 60 pounds of dough! In time the yeast acts as a leavening agent which causes the dough to expand. In fact, that much dough, when baked, will make enough bread to feed 40 people for three meals a day for three days! That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, the Kingdom which is now breaking into our world all around us.

Jesus is such a generous teacher. He doesn't need to tell us both these parables because they both make the very same points. But he does, because he wants us to understand what the Kingdom of God is like, what it looks like when things around us are in accordance with God's will. In these two tiny parables there are at least three giant truths Jesus communicates to us about the Kingdom. Let's look at them through one at a time.

Truth number one: *We are invited to participate in the establishment of God's Kingdom on this earth.*

A man is given a small seed. A woman is given a pinch of yeast. Neither one can take credit for that which they hold in their hands. Neither one can claim responsibility for what exists in the nature of these two small things which lets them have the effect they eventually have. The man can't turn a seed into a tree, any more than the woman can activate yeast to ferment in the dough. Likely, neither of them really even understands how these things happen. Nonetheless, they are given the privilege of participating in the process. The man gets his hands dirty as he buries the seed. The woman gets her hands into the dough all the way up to her elbows.

Do you see what Jesus is teaching us here? God will place things in our hands which we then are invited to use, by his grace, towards the building and establishment of God's Kingdom here. Just as God invited Adam and Eve to join him in carrying out his will in creation, God invites us, his church, to do the same thing. For instance, when by God's grace you love and forgive an enemy, because you have first been loved and forgiven, isn't it possible that in doing so a seed that is planted in the heart of that enemy might one day take root and grow? When by God's grace you speak a word of good news of God's love to one who believes she is unlovable, doing so because you first came to realize that your unlovable self was actually loved, is it possible then that you are working yeast into a heart that might one day cause that heart to expand in beautiful ways? Now, we can't control the outcome of these things and we may not even understand how they work, but – think of this! – we get to participate in God's Kingdom expansion nonetheless.

That leads to truth number two: *The Kingdom of God in our midst always begins in an amazingly inconspicuous fashion.*

Most of us aren't that familiar with mustard trees. We do know redwood trees, however. There are, in fact, several right outside these doors. The world's tallest living tree, a tree named Hyperion, is just north of here in Redwood National Park. The tree stands 380 feet tall and is estimated to weigh about 1.6 million pounds. If you didn't already know it were possible, you would never believe that such a massive thing could grow from such a tiny seed. It's nothing. It's throwaway.

This is always how the Kingdom of God arrives. Inconspicuous. Small. Unnoticed. Seemingly worthless and powerless. A child is born in a borrowed stable to peasant parents caught up in scandal in the middle of a lonely night and the only visitors sent to greet the newborn child are shepherd scum. It's nothing. A convicted and beaten man hangs one Friday afternoon on just another Roman cross between two common criminals and is stuck away in a dark, cold tomb by sundown. That's no way to start a revolution. Even when he rises from the dead Jesus doesn't ride into town the conquering hero but appears privately to the most unlikely people one might expect to be chosen to share the news: peasant women, prostitutes, fisherman and tax collectors. Who in the world will believe *their* story?

Do you think the Kingdom of God breaks into our world these days any differently? It does not. Heaven is in our midst, God at work through us and in us establishing his will on earth, but it is inconspicuous, small, unnoticed, and, in the eyes of many, worthless and powerless. And the impact is never immediate. It takes a long time for a seed to grow into a tree. Yeast does not raise dough instantly on contact. Waiting is always involved.

If you've been a Christian for many years, don't you wonder sometimes why it seems to take so long to see your life transform. Why am I still wrestling with the same sin in my life after all these years?¹⁴ But even the Christian who is submitted to Christ is not going to change overnight. It takes a lifetime for Christ to work his character into our lives. And in our world things at times seem as bad as ever, as un-Kingdom-like as they ever have been. The opposition to heaven is tremendous. The task before us is immense. But just because we do not see dynamic and sudden results, we must not conclude that the Kingdom is not on the move. Do not be discouraged in your faith over what, at times, may appear to be a lack of success. God is at

¹⁴ I think of Paul's words in Romans 7:15-20.

work! Our job is simply to use what small thing God has placed in our hands – to love, and share good news, and serve, and forgive, and seek justice, and show kindness, and walk with humility, and to do so in the most ordinary times of life – and then leave the results of that little seed planted and that small pinch of yeast kneaded in God’s hands. We are not responsible for the results. We do what we can do and then the rest is up to God.

We can do this because of truth number three: *In time the Kingdom of God will overwhelm us all in abundant fashion.*

Commentator Dale Bruner says that one day the Kingdom of Heaven will become a sheltering tree and a nourishing loaf for the entire world.¹⁵ Jesus says that the tiny mustard seed will one day grow into a tree that provides a home for birds of all kinds. He’s using an Old Testament reference here. In Ezekiel 31, along with several other places, we read about the tree God will one day establish. It will be so massive that, **“All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lives.”**¹⁶ This was prophesy that declared that at one time even the Gentiles, all peoples, would be invited to be included in God’s family. Similarly, a little yeast kneaded into the dough in time will produce a feast for everyone who is hungry, no matter who they are. The results, as left in God’s hands, will be overwhelming and total.

This is where our faith is tested. The man must believe that the seed hidden under the dirt will be transformed into a tree that nests countless birds. The woman must believe that the yeast she works into the dough will produce a feast for her whole village. We must also have faith that inconspicuous, ordinary Kingdom works done by ordinary Kingdom people on ordinary Kingdom days, will eventually be used by God to bring about something extraordinary. Remember, a day is coming when Christ will return and on that day the range of God’s effective will, the rule and reign of heaven, will have expanded to all of creation. There will be nothing left which stands in opposition to God. No more pain, or sickness, or war, or violence, or racism, or division of any kind, or hatred, or lust, or pride, or greed, or sin of any kind, or evil, or fear, or even death. Life then will be so much more abundant than it is now that the comparison of a redwood seed to a redwood tree would aptly describe the comparison of

life on this day to life in that day. In other words, there is no comparison.

The Kingdom of God, the range of God’s effective will, is like a mustard seed a man buries in the dirt. The Kingdom of God is like yeast a woman kneads into the flour. Do you understand what that means? We are invited to participate in the establishment of God’s Kingdom on this earth. Don’t be surprised, however, when the Kingdom of God in our midst begins in an amazingly inconspicuous fashion. It always does. Do not lose hope, because in time the Kingdom of God will overwhelm us all in abundant fashion.

Here’s what I hope you will do with this. Tomorrow is December 10th. Nothing all that extraordinary about tomorrow. It’s just another Monday. Where will you be tomorrow? Do you believe that the Kingdom of God will be in your midst in that ordinary time and place? Notice that Jesus doesn’t choose a priest or a king in these parables, just an ordinary man and an ordinary woman. And he doesn’t ask the man to build an entire vineyard and to produce the finest wines in the land. He just has him plant a seed in the dirt. He doesn’t have the woman preparing beef wellington or baked alaska. All she has to do is knead yeast into dough. God will take care of the rest.

If you believe this is true – and I don’t assume that you do – if you believe this is true then tomorrow, Monday, December 10th, take whatever small ordinary thing God has placed in your hand, use it as it is meant to be used, and leave the extraordinary results to God.

Pray for the people God has placed on your heart tomorrow. You may not see any immediate results from your prayers. Keep praying anyway.

Forgive somebody tomorrow who is done you wrong. Release that seed of resentment and let it die in the ground. You probably will not see anything change immediately. Forgive anyway.

Who have you hurt? Use the ordinary day tomorrow to ask for forgiveness. There may not be dramatic results on the spot, but trust nonetheless that your relationship will be leavened with grace.

Who are the people you will be with tomorrow? Whether you like them or not, they are beloved by God, created in his image, immortal beings worth dying for. So ask God to help you show them love, and kindness, and patience. I doubt it will change their lives immediately. But you do not know the ultimate impact of even one kind word spoken in love.

¹⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 190), 30.

¹⁶ Ezekiel 31:6 (NRSV). Also reference Psalm 104:12, Ezekiel 17:23, Daniel 4:9-21.

Where will you see injustice tomorrow, something in some corner of the world that is not as it should be? You have an opportunity to participate in seeing heaven creep into that little corner of the world. A hungry person fed. A neglected person noticed. An outsider let in. A stuck person set free. A lonely person befriended. Can you believe that even a small, unnoticed act of justice will some day echo throughout eternity?

In a few moments we will pray the Lord's Prayer together. Pay attention to that line in the middle of the prayer, that line which may make a little more sense to you now. *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Do you believe that God will answer this prayer, this prayer that Jesus told us we ought to pray whenever we pray? He will. God is faithful and so God will indeed answer this prayer. What at first, and even now, may seem inconspicuous and underwhelming will eventually permeate and transform our world into something that, to us now, is quite unimaginable. What was first obscure will eventually be impossible to ignore. May we live tomorrow, and the ordinary day after that, believing this extraordinary truth.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 13:18-21 again. Don't be fooled into thinking such a short passage isn't loaded. It is! What do you notice first?
2. Think carefully about the parable of the mustard seed. What does it teach us about the Kingdom of God?
3. Now think carefully about the parable of the yeast. Does this parable add anything new to our understanding of God's Kingdom?
4. What does it mean to you that God has invited you to participate in the establishment of his Kingdom in this world? What role do you imagine you are to play?
5. Where are you discouraged these days because it seems that in spite of prayers and efforts that no progress is being made towards what you know must be God's will? Can you believe that God is still at work in those circumstances, or is that simply too much to believe at this point?

6. Today is an ordinary day. What seed have you sown? What yeast have you worked into the dough? The day isn't over yet!
7. When we pray '*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*' what are we praying for?
8. What does heaven look like when heaven has come to earth?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is one thing that we can say is true about the Kingdom of God? What is it really like?