

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

I Kings 3:5-12

Psalm 119:129-136

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

07/30/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

31[Jesus] put before [the crowds] 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.” 33He 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.” 44“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for

the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A Bush Tree?

Good morning! When Dave Etling started youth ministry in Martins Ferry, Ohio where I grew up, he saw a need. On Friday nights after football games the high school students had two places to go. One was a pizza place, and the other was outside or behind the bar across the street. This was less than ideal. So he created the Community Room. In the basement of this giant Presbyterian church building he outfitted the place with everything a young high school student might want. Loads of old but comfy couches, a giant television, a pool table, etc. It started small, but little by little it grew. It was perfect for myself and the rag-tag group of people I called friends. In fact, it was perfect for almost everyone. It grew so large that we ended up blocking the street off, and attendance hit something like 250-350 students throughout one evening! One of the coolest things was that it remained a safe space for all students, especially the misfits and social outcasts. Sure, the popular kids were there too, but it always had a sense of belonging to the outsider.

Which brings us to the Gospel text today, because there's a detail about the mustard plant that I think is fantastic and which fits well with the Community Room that Dave Etling started. Our lesson has several parables, but it's the mustard seed that I have grown more and more to love each time I read it. The story tells us about a tiny mustard seed, which was

generally one of the smallest seeds that a human eye could see 2,000 years ago in Israel. What it certainly didn't grow into was a tree! It is less of a tree and more of a bush. One commentary cited that its average growth saw it only reach heights of six feet, with the tallest ones hitting 9-10.¹ The writer explains that *“The ‘tree’ motif comes not from observation of mustard seeds and plants, but reflects the symbol of the imperial tree found in representations of empires... In the original parable of Jesus, the surprising, imagination-stretching, and presupposition-questioning tension resulted from the juxtaposition of the imperial tree image with the lowly mustard seed and plant.”*²

So where great powers like the Roman Empire would imagine themselves as some massive over-arching tree with grand limbs, Jesus intentionally subverts the expected image and instead compares the kingdom of heaven to a large bush, the perfect place for the smallest and most vulnerable animals to find safety. It's just fantastic! It subverts our expectations of what is grand and majestic and instead presents us with a place where even the lowliest might find protection. Daniel J. Harrington writes that these parables *“provide information about the NATURE of the Kingdom and how one should respond to it.”*³ And my main man Douglas R.A. Hare points out that the mustard seed and leavened bread parables are not *“intended to encourage the church to regard itself as gradually growing and becoming more powerful within the world, or as ‘leavening’ the world. Both proclaim that God’s action in the world, while almost imperceptible... or hidden... is nonetheless real and will in God’s own time*

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 219.

² Ibid.

³ Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 209.

come to full fruition."⁴ The focus isn't on us, but on what God is already doing. It's also a comfort. Growth takes time, and while it might seem like nothing is happening to our eyes, these two parables show us that God is indeed hard at work!

Which brings us to that leavened bread. Hare continues writing that *"the woman hid the leaven in three measures of wheat flour, that is, a huge batch of dough made from approximately fifty pounds of flour! It has been estimated that the bread sufficient for over one hundred people would come from her oven... the quantity of flour suggests a festive occasion."*⁵

So, while the first two parables focus on God's action, it's the second two, spoken not to the crowds but to the disciples, that help us to understand what the human response should look like.⁶ The key here is not on the work that goes into finding, but on the ecstatic and exuberant response! "Look at how amazing this is!" we might say. We drop everything we're doing to give this amazing thing ALL of our attention. It was common in the first century to bury your valuables, because you never knew which army might be passing by your house tomorrow. So like the person digging in the field we are called to respond enthusiastically to the treasure that is God's Kingdom.

These parables call on us to do two different things. The mustard seed and leaven remind us that God's growth might be invisible to our eye. They remind us that the Kingdom of Heaven will be a place especially welcoming to the misfit and outsider. If you're part of the vulnerable, this is the place for you. You may find shelter and safety in what God is building. The other

⁴ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 156.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 157.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 156.

parables remind us of the wonder and splendor of God's work. Time might make us feel jaded and worn thin, but with today's text we can come to them again and look with fresh eyes. Like a toddler on Christmas morning we stare wide-eyed at the greatness of the Kingdom of Heaven. "All this is for me?!", we might ask. "Of course!" God responds, "I've known you since you were in your mother's womb. I have counted every hair on your beautiful head. You are my beloved! Why would you expect anything less!" Amen.