

“A Tiny Seed and a Dash of Yeast”

Introduction: Last week we began reflecting on the challenge that many have, both people of faith and those considering it, with believing in a God who claims to be loving and powerful yet seems to allow a great deal of innocent suffering in our world. It is in fact the most common stated reason for unbelief among those under 40 years of age.

That is not just a modern concern. In the days when Jesus lived, many were able to hear him personally declare: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Ma. 4:17). This “good news of the kingdom” (4:23) was the essence of the preaching and teaching of Jesus as Matthew lays it out for us. And yet, if Jesus had really brought God’s kingdom near, why did it seem to be such an underwhelming event? Why hadn’t evil been thoroughly and totally vanquished? Why wasn’t the Messiah ruling in a grand and glorious way? Why was there still so much innocent suffering going on, with the Roman oppressors dominating the land, and disease and death still daily experiences?

To these ancient, as well as our modern questions, Jesus responds in large measure using the vehicle of a parable, a teaching tool which seeks to convey a truth by comparing it with something else. The word parable means to throw something alongside something else for purposes of illumination. Parables had a way of drawing the listener in and getting him or her to hear and consider things differently. Above all, Jesus used parables to highlight the inbreaking reign of God that had begun with his arrival and would be brought to its fullness upon his return.

To start, let’s hear again the parable we considered last week, that of the wheat and the weeds. We’ll also hear Jesus’ explanation of it, but along the way, don’t miss the two little parables that lie in between. What truth, what encouragement, was Jesus seeking to convey to his listeners by laying the Kingdom of God alongside a tiny seed and a dash of yeast? [READ]

I. A Field with Wheat and Weeds

A. As we considered the parable of the wheat and the weeds, we learned that in the present time, the kingdom of God is like a field with both wheat as well as weeds. As the servants of the farmer sought to understand this, Jesus sought to drive home the point that it was an enemy who had sown weeds in the field; evil did not and does not come from the hand of God. We also heard how the servants offered to pull the weeds up, but that, despite their good intentions, they were not, according to the farmer, discerning enough or wise enough to do so. Furthermore, their understanding of power was not the way God understood power, particularly as we see it lovingly displayed in the crucifixion and resurrection.

B. In his explanation of the parable, we heard Jesus inform us that the enemy is the devil, that personal force of evil who seeks to oppose all that God desires for good, but that evil will not have the last word. Hope looms on the horizon of history. There will be a final harvest in which those who oppose the love and purposes of God will be weeded out. In the meantime, we are to be careful how we pass judgment on others. God will be the ultimate judge; our responsibility is to share his love wherever we find ourselves planted.

C. During this time, evil will still be with us. This doesn't surprise Jesus and it shouldn't surprise us. As Peter, who studied under Jesus, puts it in his first letter: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith . . ." (1 Pe. 5:8). To help us stand firm, Jesus gives us the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. Both are meant to encourage us by assuring us that God's kingdom is indeed at hand, and that, even now, in between the present time and the final harvest, God is at work, taking on the enemy of evil and bringing about transformation, even when it may not seem obvious to us. Let's look a little more closely at these two short, but powerful parables.

II. The Kingdom is Like a Mustard Seed (vv. 31-32)

A. Know that the mustard bush is a plant that is simultaneously glorious and yet can look suspiciously like a weed. More to the point, the mustard seed was the tiniest seed known in Palestine; when planting it, it must have been difficult to imagine it growing into a tree of between 8-12 feet in height with many beautiful branches providing shelter for the birds of the air.

B. Here, the astute listener might very well have thought of several prophetic references to a large, fruitful and protective tree, like that alluded to by Ezekiel (17:22-24). Instead of the trees planted by the proud, pagan kings, this is what the LORD says:

I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it . . . it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall.

This is a Messianic promise which pictures a shoot, a member of King David's family, becoming a tree in which people from every nation come to rest. It's a promise in which heaven and earth are re-connected and those connected are sustained through the gift of a tree. Such connection ultimately took place through Jesus, who brought the kingdom of God by becoming a tiny seed—a single cell in the womb of Mary—and then he grew and hung on a tree where he conquered evil, sin, and death. What appeared to be insignificant and weak, a shoot, a seed, a cross, would take on surprisingly significant proportions.

Don't be fooled, or dismayed, by what seem like insignificant beginnings, Jesus wants us to know. God is at work in the world, even when it may not look like it. This little seed will turn out to be powerfully effective and pervasive, becoming the "largest of garden plants."

III. The Kingdom is Like Yeast (v. 33)

A. While we probably think of yeast as a good thing, as the thing that makes bread rise, in the Bible yeast is typically not a good thing; it is a corrupting agent. Yet here, yeast is taken by a woman who mixes it (the word actually means to hide or conceal) into a huge amount of flour. The yeast winds up affecting and inhabiting everything. The picture Jesus draws for us here is of a kingdom coming about through a stealth operation. A person with no conventional power (a woman) takes a corrupting agent and smuggles it into the flour, changing everything! God's power, Jesus is revealing, is like this. It may not look like power, but it is out there, undercover, even hidden from view, but bringing everything under its influence. Eventually, it will produce something great and satisfying.

B. We might say that if the mustard seed suggests extensive growth from an insignificant beginning, the yeast communicates intensive transformation. For, what yeast does is transform everything from the inside out. So, while many in the first century, and we in the twenty first, might have expected a Messiah who takes on evil and brings about a world revolution through a powerful political structure, what Jesus began to bring about was a revolution of character. It's a revolution that doesn't begin with laws or social institutions but with an inner movement of the heart.

IV. Patience in the Meantime

A. At the heart of these three parables, Jesus is sounding a note of patience. It's a call for the patience of his followers as they yearn for him to finish what he started, trusting that he is at work in the world. As well, it's a call for the patience of God himself who I'm sure doesn't enjoy the sight of his wheatfield sprinkled with weeds, but also, gratefully, doesn't want to declare it to be harvest-time too soon. His desire is that the people of the world have time to come and enjoy what he is growing, resting in his branches and being fed and transformed by his love.

As Peter puts it in his second letter:

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

B. In the interim, as we await the return of Jesus, Peter counsels his readers not to just sit around and do nothing, but to live holy and godly lives, joining God in what he is doing, walking humbly with him, pursuing justice, and extending mercy as we look forward to a new heaven and new earth when God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes [2 Peter 3:8-13; Rev. 21:4]

As NT Wright describes it, "We wait with patience, not like people in a dark room wondering if anyone will ever come with a lighted candle, but like people in early morning who know that the sun has arisen and are now waiting for the full brightness of day" (*Matthew for Everyone, Part I, 170*).

As we long for God to act, to put the world to rights, and to do away with evil and suffering and death, let us remind ourselves that in Jesus, God has already acted, more than we could ask for or imagine. What we await is the full brightness, the full outworking of those events.

Until then, may we bring him our tears, and the tears of those suffering around us. May we ask him how we might help dry some of the tears of others, knowing that one day God himself will wipe every tear away (Rev. 21:4).

Let us sing our final hymn as a prayer to that end: *Jesus, with Thy Church Abide*