

**Sermon: The Kingdom as a Verb**

**Scripture: Matthew 13:31**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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Listen to the images that Jesus uses to speak of the Kingdom of God – a tiny mustard seed, a very small amount of yeast in a large amount of dough, a treasure buried in a field, a pearl and fish caught in a net. He could have chosen the sun; that would have been an immense, powerful, dominant image of the kingdom of God - a little more imposing than a mustard seed. He could have chosen the ocean itself, one of the greatest things the human being can know, but instead he spoke of a few fish caught in a net. He could have chosen the universe even, the stars of the sky, to draw our attention out to the immensity of the kingdom of God but instead he used the image of a little yeast that leavens a bunch of dough in a bakery, saying “to what shall I compare the kingdom of God...”

The thing with Jesus’ parables is that they really aren’t these thoughtful sayings that you could put on the tag of a tea bag or under the cap of a Snapple bottle or at the beginning of a bulletin that gives you a little daily wisdom for living your life. Rather his parables are more like riddles; not riddles to unravel and figure out to reach some conclusion but rather riddles that when you sit with them begin to unravel yourself, your own assumptions and understandings. Many a Christian over the ages has sat down in his daily prayer or her weekly worship and simply read “the kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman took and hid in 3 measures of flour ‘til it was all leavened” and said “huh?” And that is the idea. It makes you say “huh?” “The kingdom of heaven is like the grain of a mustard seed that a man took and sowed into his field.” Try it: huh? Right. Exactly. Because there would be something wrong if Jesus were to say the kingdom of God is like this and your response was “oh, I get it! I finally understand!” If it was that clear and that simple we’d be living in some nirvanic state of bliss and wouldn’t have to worry about anything else. But we are worried, troubled by this existence and its distance from what we sense is possible, what we glimpse of this kingdom beyond...or beneath...or within it all. “It’s like a treasure in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys that field.” It begins with a “huh?” but if we can sit still long enough without panicking and heading for the shore of what we know and understand, it can begin to do its work on us, these parables of Jesus.

And at least one thing that we might begin to realize is that with these parables, Jesus might not be associating the kingdom of God with the subject or the object of the parables but with something in between, with the verb of these parables. In other words, it could be that the kingdom of God is not like a mustard seed itself nor like the man sowing it but rather the kingdom of God must be compared to the movement of transformation of the mustard seed from a tiny worthless seed into a great tree within which the birds can make their nest? And it could be that Jesus is not so much suggesting that the kingdom of God is like yeast or like dough or the baker but rather is in the growth and movement from fixed, unchanging dough into rising, spreading, growing dough being transformed into nutritious life-giving loaves of bread. It could be in the rising itself, in its transformation that Jesus is saying the Kingdom is compared and revealed. And it's not the man or the pearl that Jesus was emphasizing but man's action of giving away everything in order to buy it. It's the life transformation. The kingdom of God is in the verb, the movement, the change, the transforming that takes place for the seed, the dough, the man in the field, the fish in the net, for us. And it's in the stasis that the kingdom is lost.

And yet the irony...oh how we long for things to stay the same! It's why the Pharisees were so threatened by Jesus. He represented a huge threat to the way things always had been and the way they always wanted things to be. It's how this chapter of parables ends with his hometown rejecting him because they can't believe that he has changed and that he is anything more than the carpenter's son that they grew up with. But the kingdom of God is located in this change in this growth and it is located within those who can call for and hope for and recognize what might just come to be. The kingdom of God is within the transformation. Can we bless the situations in our lives then that are forcing some kind of growth and transformation? Can we be cautious of how rigid and lifeless we can become in our insistence upon keeping things the way they always have been? Are we willing to pray for God to change us and accept the changes that come so that the kingdom can be revealed in our midst? 'Cause otherwise and inevitably what will happen if we decide that things should stay the same just as they are now is that we will end up changing God to fit Him into our little kingdom instead of God expanding us to fit into His.