

“The Parables According to Matthew, Part Four: Leaven”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 9th 2017 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 13: 31-33

For the second week in a row...for the second consecutive week...we are confronted, this morning, not by one but by two of Christ's parables: once again, both found in Matthew's 13th chapter. Unlike last Sunday, however, when the two parables we encountered were in many ways very different parables—despite sharing an underlying world-view—this morning it is safe to claim that the two parables we have just heard are very much variations (fairly minor variations) on precisely the same theme.

The first parable, which Matthew presumably borrowed from Mark's Gospel, is the famous parable of the mustard seed: a parable which, I am told, attributes something to the mustard seed, which is not entirely accurate. Never mind! It's a good parable all the same.

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds (apparently that's the inaccuracy, but never mind!)...it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

To that parable, Matthew immediately adds a second parable: a parable that Matthew shares with Luke. Incidentally: that makes this a perfect time for me briefly to elaborate on a point that I made a few weeks back: namely that while most of the parables we will be viewing this summer are unique to Matthew, a small handful come from what New Testament scholars call the “Q” document. (Q: as in the letter Q!) We don't possess a copy of that document, but it remains a pretty good scholarly hypothesis, namely that both Luke and Matthew not only had a copy of Mark's Gospel in front of them when they composed their Gospels, but also had a second document which explains why Matthew and Luke will sometimes sound alike when they also sound like Mark, but at other times will sound alike even when they are sharing a story or a teaching not found in Mark. At any rate: the parable which immediately follows the parable of the mustard seed—providing an echo of that parable—is one of the parables not found in Mark that is found both in Luke and in Matthew. It goes like this.

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” That's it! That's the whole parable...finished nearly as soon as it starts. But it really does echo the mustard seed parable, because like the mustard seed parable it is based upon a contrast between a small, seemingly insignificant beginning, eventually succeeded by a grand triumphant end. And so that tiny mustard seed, which to the untrained eye could

easily be mistaken for a piece of dirt, yields a large plant: nearly the size of a tree. And so that small spoonful of yeast provides the engine that leavens three large measures of flour. Seed and yeast may both appear to be insignificant...but in the end both of them...both of them make the decisive difference. No yeast...no leaven...and there is no bread...at least not of the leavened variety. No seed...no matter how rich the soil, no matter how plentiful the rain, no matter how potent the sun...and there will be no crop, no garden, no harvest. And yes: according to Jesus...that's what...that's what the Kingdom of heaven is like.

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Well. Before I try to expand...a little more fully...on the wider implications of those two wee parables, I need to share a thought with you...a rather odd thought that crossed my mind this past week as I pondered the rather bold move Jesus makes here: explicitly comparing the kingdom of heaven, first to the surprising potency of a mustard seed, and then to the surprising potency of a spoonful of leaven. And that odd thought has to do with the challenge we preachers face year in and year out as Easter approaches. Indeed! I have a group of preacher friends who make it a point to avoid using any of the obvious symbols that we love to trot out at Easter in order to unpack the deep meaning of that most sacred of Christian festivals. And so we speak of new life bursting from the ground...and, even more predictably...we speak of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, seizing on those natural processes as a way of making the miracle of Easter less inaccessible. Like I say: not everyone finds those analogies helpful and some find them a terrible distraction from the heart of the Easter story which, when you think about it, is of interest precisely because it is so radically unnatural in every conceivable way. We've all seen nature revive in the spring. And we've all seen butterflies emerge from a cocoon. But what we haven't seen is a dead man leaving his tomb! Hence the objection to all of those problematic comparisons: comparisons between that extraordinary thing we call the resurrection, and those wondrous but nevertheless entirely ordinary things such as the coming of spring and the emergence of a butterfly. But here's the thing!

What Jesus does in both of these mini-parables, is no different than what a well-intentioned preacher does when, in trying to speak of the miracle of Easter, he or she points to a butterfly set free from its cocoon. The key word in both instances is the word "like", as in "the kingdom of heaven is like...is like a mustard seed sown in the ground...is like leaven added to three measures of flour." As soon as we use the word like, we are creating a comparison...

...if you can think back to your high-school English, you will recall that the fancy name for such a comparison is a "simile"...

...as soon as you use the word "like", you are acknowledging that the two things you are comparing differ in some ways, even though they are similar in some ways. And so Jesus here is not saying that the Kingdom of heaven is a mustard seed...nor is he saying that the Kingdom of heaven is a spoonful of yeast...nor is that preacher saying (at least I hope they are not saying) that the miracle of Easter is identical to a butterfly's emergence from the cocoon. But what is being said is that

something about that butterfly does point to Easter...just as something about that mustard seed...and something about that scattering of leaven...does, in fact, point toward the Kingdom...provides a hint about the Kingdom...offers a crucial clue...about the Kingdom of heaven. But what is that clue? What is that point of comparison?

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Well: I will be so bold as to suggest that the Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus offers it through these two parables, is a reality that remains hidden behind a far from impressive exterior, until it bursts forth with unexpected power. And I will go even further and suggest that the entire story of salvation—the story that unfolds in the pages of our scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike—is grounded in precisely the pattern outlined in these parables.

Go no further...even before you crack open the pages of your Bibles...go no further than the fact that the Biblical literature consists of a series of documents that come to us from a Hebraic background, which is to say that our Bibles are a thoroughly Jewish book. And that is remarkable, because it is not something anyone could possibly have predicted two or three thousand years ago. Believe me: when the Assyrians set out to conquer the ancient near East some 2800 years ago, they would have laughed with great glee had someone solemnly assured them that the struggling nations of Israel and Judah were giving birth to a culture that would shape whole civilizations for thousands of years. No doubt the Babylonians would have responded with similar mirth, as would the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. And yet this small nation which—with the exception of the reigns of David and Solomon—never really amounted to much, provided the cultural and theological seed which has reverberated down through the centuries. In the memorable words of Northrop Frye: “The Bible is history written from the perspective of the losers’, making it all the more remarkable that it is an account of history that continues to shake and to shape our world. But, of course, that’s only the exterior shell of the Biblical seed!

As soon as we press ahead and actually open the book, we will continue to be struck by the extent to which the Biblical story is shaped around the travails and ultimate triumphs of the most unlikely of characters. Consider, for instance, the role played over and over again by the second born son in so many Biblical stories: a point I have no hesitation making despite the fact that I am a first born son. Not Cain but Abel is the faithful one. Not Ishmael but Isaac. Not Esau but Jacob. Not Reuben but Joseph. And yes, not Saul the first King of Israel—a man of stature and strength—but rather David, chosen as a young boy, but even as a young boy triumphing over the giant Goliath. Nor should we forget the way in which the heart of the Biblical story revolves around a rag-tag group of slaves set free, against all odds, from the physical and spiritual shackles that had held them captive. The Kingdom of heaven is to be found not in the obvious places, not in the grand palaces of the Pharaoh, but rather quietly at work beneath the surface. In the tiny grain of seed. In the tiny grain of yeast. Above all...above all...in those two potent seeds we celebrate year in and year out as members of the Church: on the one hand the cradle...on the other hand the Cross.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of a helpless infant, born into poverty, born into exile, born in a stable. Far from being a symbol of strength, if any of the Christmas story serves as a symbol, it's a symbol of weakness and vulnerability. And yet: that is a true image of the Kingdom of Heaven...an image that gets us even closer to the Kingdom of Heaven than either of these marvelous parables, since that cradle houses not a grain of seed nor a grain of leaven, but something far better: the Lord of heaven and earth. As for that Cross...

...even more dramatically than the cradle, that Cross represents defeat...a magnificent defeat...a defeat which is the most potent of any seed, a seed that gives birth to that most triumphant of new beginnings, the one we call Easter. Much like the cradle, the Cross also serves as an image of the Kingdom of Heaven, an image that gets us even closer to the Kingdom than even the very best parable can succeed in doing, since it goes far beyond what mere words can convey, showing us the humility with which God ushers in a new beginning for each...and for all. Not in a way that will appear obvious to the untrained eye...anymore than the untrained eye will grasp the importance of the mustard seed, will grasp the potency of that tiny grain of yeast.

All of which...all of which should make it abundantly clear that we are in the presence, this morning, of parables of grace: parables that proclaim the unstoppable power of the love that has been made known to us, the love that has been offered to us with no strings attached, in and through this Jesus, in and through the Christ whose very life became a parable. These parables that ask nothing of us, but offer everything to us, everything we could possibly desire. Although, that having been said, these parables—parables of grace though they be—are also parables that offer a truthful account of the world in which we live. A world that finds a hundred ways to break our hearts and in the process, finds countless ways in which to veil from us the real story of our lives, the story of what really is happening, the story of what really matters in the end. A story grounded in the relentless power and the unyielding love of our God who chooses, more often than not, to remain hidden from view. Hidden from view...like that mustard seed...like that grain of yeast.

He put another parable before them saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of sour, till it was all leavened."

Till it was all leavened. All leavened. All.

And glory be to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus. Now and forever more! Amen!