

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like…” by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

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The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it 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.”

The Parable of the Yeast

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with ^[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Three Parables

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; 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; ⁴⁶ on 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; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Treasures New and Old

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in 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 Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Matthew keeps the parables rolling as he shares these last five parables in chapter 13. As we head into this conversation today, it is important to know and remember that Matthew’s audience was primarily Jewish, and so throughout his

teachings he is intentionally sharing with his audience the importance of Jesus being a part of the Jewish heritage, while also pushing their boundaries and showing them that Jesus, while Jewish, is up to new things.

And that theme of “new” is what the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is all about – new life, new community, new ways of being. The last few sermons I’ve preached have focused on that restoring work of God and the ways we are invited and called to join in that work—joining God in the “on earth as it is in heaven” part of life now, not just in the future. And today will be more of the same, though still a little different...and thankfully I’m in good company when it comes to sharing similar things in different ways as these parables today draw on the previous sections of this text, as well as share a common theme just told from different perspectives. So maybe one will grab you more or differently than another, and if it does, let it!

The first parable we heard today is about a mustard seed that grows to be a large tree with branches big enough for birds to find rest in. The second is about a woman who adds yeast to three measures of flour, which is enough to feed about one hundred people. There are a few ways people interpret these parables, and much we could talk about for each one, but the thing I want to focus on is the theme of abundance and hospitality.

If you’ve ever seen a mustard seed you know that the seed is very very small, so just by looking at it you certainly would not expect that small seed to become something very big, especially a tree with large enough branches for birds to find rest in. And similarly, if you have ever baked bread, you know that a little bit of yeast goes a long way. And this woman is said to be putting yeast into enough flour to make bread for a crowd.

In these two parables we can notice a couple of things about the kingdom of heaven, which is what these parables are aiming to do—help us imagine and understand more of what the kingdom of heaven looks like...The first is that it is

surprising, coming from small things that we may not notice or expect, like yeast or a mustard seed, or even the participation of a woman (which, in Jesus's time would have been pretty radical to include in this story as a seemingly "unimportant" detail that actually implies something pretty big—like the inclusion of women). The second, similar to this, is that the kingdom of heaven may seem hidden, like yeast in dough or a tiny seed in soil, and yet it can produce something much greater than its small beginnings (which is a common theme in the life and story of God—think about the story of David a lowly shepherd, or Jesus, a lowly carpenter born to an unwed mother). And along with this we find the theme of great hospitality, as the mustard seed grows branches that welcome birds of all kinds, and the yeast which produces bread for so many.

Take a moment, if you're able, to look at the picture on your bulletin today of the mustard tree, and if you're joining us online the image is of a mustard tree with many birds in its branches, created by artist Kelly Latimore. If you don't have the image in front of you, just imagine a trees with branches full of different kinds of birds. As you look, allow yourself to really see the image and pay attention to what you notice.

As do so, hear these words from the artist:

The original audience may have been perplexed by this story. They would have known that no-one would intentionally plant a mustard shrub. In fact, the Jewish Mishnah forbade the growing of mustard seeds in the garden because they were 'useless annoying weeds'. In the Hebrew Scriptures the "birds of the air" can be a reference to Gentiles/Non-Jews, the foreigner. This parable suggests that the kingdom of heaven is available to everyone. Even those who may be considered outsiders or not "Worthy". Jesus is calling us to see the significance in the insignificant. The parables of the kingdom of heaven make clear that the kingdom of heaven is not "up there". Through the parables Jesus is teaching us to "be for the world the material reality of the kingdom of heaven brought down to earth." As Jesus is himself the parable of the father so the church is meant to be the parable of Christ. A people in space and time welcoming the outcast, the foreigner, and the stranger.

These kind of communities will look like unwanted weeds to the world, or even to other Christians. However, this may be exactly the church Jesus is asking us to embody. ([Kelly Latimore Website](#))

Can you see it? Can you picture it? A beautiful, diverse, welcoming place? Can we embody it? That's the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed or yeast that produces abundant hospitality.

The next three parables shift focus just a little. The parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value show us that the kingdom of heaven is of great value, but often hidden and requires human participation/human action to find it as we don't always see it right away; and once found, it brings a new way of life, and we see more of that new way of life in the final parable.

This final parable depicts a fishing net that is dragged along the sea floor, gathering everything in its path. It is not a small net that only gathers the few select fish a fisher may seek to collect, but rather, is a large dragnet that does not discriminate as all are gathered together. This may remind us of the "indiscriminate sower" (Belief Matthew Commentary, p.183) from the parable of the sower a couple weeks ago, where the sower or farmer planted seeds on varying types of soil, not just the healthy soil. As one commentary says, "gracious, generous sowing in the one parable, and gracious, generous fishing in the other."

I think it's important to note here that some translations say that the net "caught fish of every kind" (v.47). The Greek does not actually say "fish" at all. A closer rendering would be 'every kind gathering together.' (Belief Matthew Commentary, p.183) The imagery here calls the hearers to imagine intentional and abundant diversity, which would have been a challenge to the Jewish communities as they, for hundreds of years, believed themselves to be God's chosen people alone. And while that was true that God blessed them, it was only so that they could bless others as they embodied what life with God looked like, which they didn't always get right (and to be fair, neither do we). So here, Jesus is

telling them that ALL are drawn in to life in the kingdom of God, all are scooped up and included in the net – Jews, Gentiles (which just means non-Jewish folks), sinners, tax collectors, Roman centurions, people with leprosy and other diseases, children, those who betrayed Jesus, Pharisees, women...the list could go on, and I'm sure we could come up with our own list today...Both Jews and Gentiles needed to hear that God doesn't discriminate, and even more, God *welcomes* ALL. And like the audience of that time, we today need this message, too. The church today needs this message. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet, full of diversity, much like the branches of the mustard tree that houses a diversity of birds, or yeast and flour that produces enough bread to feed a crowd. The kingdom of heaven is full of abundant hospitality. And yes... there is a portion of the text that talks about the separation of the evil and the righteous, but that is not included to strike fear or to describe what is to come. Rather, it was written as a reminder that we do not get to pick or sort out who belongs to God. God draws those boundaries, and if it's anything like how the kingdom of heaven is described in these parables and other places in scripture, I'd say the boundaries are pretty darn wide. And our job isn't to worry about them anyway, but rather, to embody the kingdom of heaven, to embody the life of Jesus—a life full of welcome, a life that values diversity, and is full of abundant joy.

So, whether you hold onto the image of a mustard tree with wide open branches, tiny measures (or packets) of yeast that bring life to cups of flour, hidden treasure that we tune our attentiveness to find, or a fishing net full of all sorts of diverse life—my hope is that we will be people, that we will be a church, who offers abundant hospitality to any and all who get caught up in our nets or branches, or who eat bread at our tables, or find glimpses of God with great joy, because we called invited, we are called, to embody and participate in the kingdom of heaven. Because the kingdom of heaven is always full of more.