

July 30, 2023  
Proper 12A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Genesis 29:15-28*

*Psalms 105:1-11, 45b*

*Romans 8:26-39*

*Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

In the Name of our insistent and loving God. Amen.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It seems a simple question, and over the past couple of weeks we've heard Jesus trying to tell us. There have been parables about sowers and seed, and wheat and weeds. Today, he takes up the question again, this time with a lot more answers.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure in a field, like a special pearl, like a giant net in the sea. Maybe this is Jesus punting, or riffing, trying out various images to see what lands. But, are these images even connected? Is Jesus having difficulty describing the kingdom of heaven?

Maybe the disconnect occurs because of the intent behind our question. Maybe when we ask, "what is the kingdom of heaven like" we are asking about particularities. Will it be nicer than here? Who will be welcome; who won't? Will I still have arthritis? Or hair? Will we even have bodies? Will our pets be there?

Surely, the crowds listening to Jesus that day would have wanted similar answers. Will the kingdom of heaven replace the Romans? Will we be free from oppression? Will there be justice *and* mercy? Will Jesus be *the* king of this kingdom?

St. Matthew is the only gospel writer to give us this extended series of kingdom parables, and I want to suggest that the cumulative effect tells us that the kingdom of heaven is not just in the future, in the great by-an-by. These parables tell us that the kingdom of heaven is breaking in around us in the here-and-now.

The images that Jesus offers us today show that the kingdom of heaven is invasive, overwhelming, unstoppable, and surprising.

Let's look at the first two parables: the mustard seed and yeast. How many of us learned that these images were about great things that come from small beginnings? We picture a majestic tree, or fluffy loaf of bread. This might make sense when we were in church school, but what happens when we come to learn that neither mustard seeds nor yeast were viewed with enthusiasm by gardeners or bakers in Jesus' time?

Mustard seeds don't produce trees, but shrubs – invasive shrubs to boot. Once the seeds are in the ground, they are out of our control. Think kudzu or garlic mustard. The image of yeast is similar. Culinary historians tell us that ancient bakers used a starter, like modern

sourdough, to leaven the loaf. For some in the first century, yeast was avoided as a contaminant that polluted the mix. Once it's added, you can't take it out.

So, here is Jesus comparing the kingdom of heaven, not to a lilac bush or a crusty baguette, but to a noxious shrub and an invasive impurity. Do you find that jarring? I think that might have been what Jesus was up to.

In saying that the kingdom of God is like an invasive weed, or out-of-control yeast, Jesus is teaching that the kingdom of God is something that is beyond our imagination and our control. Like mustard seeds and yeast, the kingdom of God is more potent than we can imagine, and is ready to break in, whether we're looking for it or not.

The good news here is that the kingdom of God, the love of God, is so insistent, that nothing can separate us from it. As Paul writes to the Romans, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God's love is that insistent. God's kingdom is that out of control.

The difficult news is that God's kingdom is that out of control. Which is to say, out of our control. Like the mustard seed and the yeast, God's kingdom will grow in spite of our worries and our fears. We may put up a fuss about where God seems to be taking us in our lives, or as a church, but that won't prevent God's love from taking root in every little crack and crevice in our lives. The fact that we drag our feet won't prevent God from trying to move us out of our self-centeredness until we can see God's handiwork in the world around us and God's presence in every person.

I want to lift up and celebrate one particular example of the kind of inbreaking of God's kingdom that I'm talking about. Yesterday was the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of eleven women to the Episcopal priesthood at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia on July 29, 1974. These women, called the "Philadelphia Eleven", were Merrill Bittner, Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Alison Cheek, Emily Hewitt, Carter Heyward, Suzanne Hiatt, Marie Moorefield, Jeannette Piccard, Betty Schiess, Katrina Swanson, and Nancy Wittig.

The reaction of the institutional church was immediate. The House of Bishops declared their ordinations "irregular", and the women were not allowed to exercise priestly functions. Nevertheless, on September 7, 1975, four more women were ordained at St. Stephen's and the Incarnation Parish in Washington, DC. The names of the "Washington Four" were Lee McGee-Street, Alison Palmer, Betty Rosenberg Powell, and Diane Tickell.

After years of, well let's call it vigorous, conversation within the church, the General Convention of 1976 approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate. The previous "irregular" ordinations were regularized, and about 100 women were ordained priests the next year. The first of those was the Rev. Jackie Means, known to many of us here at Grace, who was priested at All Saints in Indianapolis on New Year's Day 1977.

Like all such in-breakings, the road has been neither straight nor smooth. When I was in seminary in the very early 80s, women Episcopal seminarians were still rather rare. It wasn't

until 1989 that the Episcopal Church consecrated its first woman bishop, Barbara Harris. There were members of the church who raised objections to having a woman bishop because they didn't believe in women could be priests. As a woman and an African American, Harris received obscene messages and death threats. She was urged to wear a bulletproof vest to her ordination; she refused.

In recent years, it is not uncommon that a slate for a Bishop's election is all female; the list for Southern Ohio is the most recent example. Yet, there are still some in the church who wring their hands over this particular witness of God's love in our midst.

Here's a small commercial. On Friday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, in Indianapolis, there will be a screening of new documentary film, *The Philadelphia Eleven*. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion with the filmmaker, as well as two of the "Philadelphia Eleven," the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward and the Rev. Nancy Wittig. Joining them in conversation will be our own Bishop Jennifer, the first Black woman elected diocesan bishop.

The story of the Philadelphia Eleven raises questions: what does a just and inclusive community look like in practice? How do we break down barriers with grace and remain true to ourselves in the process? How do we practice radical inclusivity, allowing people to be who they are called to be?

The kingdom parables of mustard seed and yeast remind us that we can get stuck on getting kudzu instead of a rose bush. Or a misshapen loaf of sourdough rather than a perfect brioche. These parables also remind us that we have a choice of how we experience the insistence of God's kingdom.

Not being in control can cause us to panic. We can do our best to root out the mustard shrubs or try to pick out the yeast we don't like. We can resist God's leading. We can pretend that some of God's children do not exist, or that those who aren't like us are somehow less than, and not worthy of our care or our respect. We might even make poor decisions with good intentions. But these parables are clear: God's love will push and elbow its way into our lives, even if it's against the rules, even when we think we know better. As my friend Penny quips, the kingdom of God creeps in even when we don't have the good sense to want it.

We tend to think of God's love as something gentle and mild, so when it sprouts up where it isn't invited, it can feel threatening before it feels comforting. And here's the thing – the gospel makes a claim on our whole life, not just parts of it. So, sometimes it feels like God has crashed into us, but the truth is that God has been right here the whole time, just waiting for a place to take root and flourish.

And what happens then? When God's love takes root and begins to invade your life, you might start to do some crazy things. You might find yourself sharing more of your time, your talent, and your treasure with others. You might find yourself standing up for the least and the lost in the church and in the world. You might find yourself telling others about the insistent, invasive, out of control love of God through your words and through your actions.

The good news this morning is that God's kingdom, God's love, is closer than you might imagine, seeping into your life even if you don't always feel it. The good news is God's promise that no matter how messy the world might seem, no matter how stuck within yourself and your issues you might be, God's kingdom will prevail. For nothing, nothing, nothing, can separate us from God's insistent, uncontrollable love. Thanks be to God. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A big shout out to my friend and colleague The Rev. Dr. Canon Jennifer Strawbridge for inspiration in her sermon *Out of Control*. Canon Jen is associate professor in New Testament at Oxford University and G.B. Caird Fellow in Theology at Mansfield College.