

May 12      Mother's Day

The Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Matthew 13: 31-33

We continue our examination of some of Jesus' parables, trying to understand what his listeners would have heard when he shared them. Christian writers, theologians and preachers have interpreted these parables over the centuries until their explanations have become the only way to understand them. We are trying to step back and see if there might be different ways the people who heard them might have understood these stories.

We often hear that these stories shared today were told to remind us that from small beginnings great things can occur. They are seen as words of encouragement to us when we feel frustrated. We are told that our small efforts, which at first glance seem to have done disappointingly little, might still blossom into something bigger and worthwhile. We tell stories about how small, insignificant acts have led to dramatic life giving changes in someone's life. But here is the issue. Is this such a dominant theme of Jesus' teaching that three of the four gospels recount it? Would all of the writers wanted to stress how important little acts are? I doubt it. Something more must be going on.

What are some other messages that Jesus might have shared through these stories? What if we see these parables as stories about the abundance and grace of God? What if they are stories of how God is at work, right now, in our lives? What if they are reminding us that sometimes it takes time to see results and so we are called to wait on God, trusting in God's abundance? What if it is a challenge to do our part in ushering in the kingdom, but to also know that our task, at times, is to step back and trust? All of these interpretations, and more, could have been part of what Jesus was sharing and all of them seem more compelling than the simple story line that from small actions big things can happen.

Both of these stories have a domestic quality about them. You have the person planting or scattering seed in a field or garden, depending upon the gospel. A simple

task done by both men and women at that time. You also have a story of bread making, something women would do several times a week. Into the ordinary activities of life Jesus inserts, "the Kingdom of God is like." It seems to ask us to pause and reflect on what it means for us to envision the kingdom as already happening in our lives. So often, when we talk or think about the Kingdom of God, we think about it as something yet to come or something we will receive when we die. What does it mean for you to think that God is at work right now in your home and in the world? If life is going well, to believe that God is at work right now is easy. It is much harder to celebrate God's activity in our lives when things are tough. It is really challenging to trust in God's abundance when life seems filled with diminishment and loss.

If God's kingdom is already happening, you have a role to play. Jesus, in talking about this kingdom used images of seed scattering and baking bread highlighting common tasks. If he were here today he might just as easily use ideas such as: the Kingdom of God is like planting spring flowers, the Kingdom of God is like visiting a friend, or the Kingdom of God is like making dinner. I believe Jesus wants us to reflect on how we are agents of God in everything we do.

If this is the case, I hope you would ask yourself, "What is my role in the various situations life gives me in helping bring in the Kingdom of God?" What is God calling me to do? We should not be looking at big or spectacular efforts but the little things, things that seemingly have little consequence in the moment but might allow God to be at work in a situation in ways that would not be possible without our effort. Stories of little efforts bringing big results are many. On Mother's day let me share just one I recall. Her son, after growing up and getting married, quit attending church. She was saddened by the fact that her grandchildren were not going to church. She decided to send them cards on Easter and religious cards at Christmas. When they visited, she continued to attend church after having made the family breakfast. She did not push faith. She wondered if it was doing any good. Then one day her oldest grandchild, while visiting, said, "Grandma, why do you go to church?" In simple ways she shared how her faith helps her through difficult times, the love of others there supports her and it is a place to learn how she can be a better person and make the world a better place. The

grandchild asked if she could go with her. Her son had no objection so they went. Afterwards there were no great changes. She kept sending the cards, kept going to church, and kept praying. This granddaughter went off to college and while there was invited to a college Christian group. She was feeling alone and scared and remembered her grandmother saying church was a place to find friends and support. So she said yes. She soon became active in that group and later in a church after college.

So yes, we have a role in bringing God's kingdom here and now. Yet, daily we have to pray how to be used. And even more, when to step back. These parables are a challenge for us to, at times, pause in our efforts and trust. It takes time for a seed to germinate and grow. It takes time for yeast to do its work. If you work up the soil instead of being patient the seed likely will not germinate. If you start working the bread before the first rise is complete, the final product will be dense and less than appealing. So yes, we are called to see our part but we are also called upon to trust. This call for patience and trust is hardest when we want results now.

I think of how many times I feel called upon to just get in there and do something in a situation. I find it hard to be patient. It has been my experience that when I push too hard, inject myself too fully into something it rarely helps and often hurts. God will give us tasks to do. But also God asks us to trust that God is at work in situations even when we cannot see results.

One more story about trusting and waiting. They had been good friends for years and had raised their children together. One day her friend mentioned that she had met a person new to the community at a sewing group she attended. This new friendship blossomed and time for the old friendship diminished. She was feeling angry, left out and more. Her first response was to write a letter to her friend telling her how she hurt her. But in prayer she realized that this was not helpful. In her prayers she heard, continue to be her friend and rejoice that she has found others as well. She did not want to hear that but she continued to be nice and she and her friend did get together, just not as often. She learned to trust that God was in the situation. One day she was at church and heard about a service project. She had the time and so she volunteered. She found it to be fun and became more involved. Writing about this a few years later

she says she had not realized how her close knit friendship with one person was really not a good thing. It was stifling. In expanding her horizons her life was enriched, she found new friends, new outlets and life was better than ever. She did not lose the old friendship but it changed and developed into something new. She was so glad she did not send the letter of hurt and ultimately trusted that through God something good would happen.

The parable of the Mustard Seed and the parable of the Leaven can be read together by simply observing that in going from yeast to bread, and from seed to plant, something desirable emerges. Both parables seem to say that the Kingdom of God is already here. God is as at work in our lives and the lives of others. Sometimes we are called to participate in its work, sowing the seed, kneading the bread. Sometimes we have to step back and trust God is at work even when it seems nothing is happening. Seeds grow, yeast does its thing. We may not always see the results. Sometimes, even with our best efforts things don't work out. But when we strive to live each day as if the Kingdom of God is happening and we have a role in it, either active or in patiently praying, we will see more often than not, how God has created something desirable. I believe this is part of the message Jesus was trying to get through to those who first heard it and to us as well.