

July 27, 2011

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...”

(Matt. 13:31-33; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-21)

The Lectionary reading for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time is Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, which encompasses five parables on the Kingdom of Heaven, much too much for me to handle in a single worship service. So for this morning, I'll be sharing my thoughts on the first two parables as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Matthew and Mark's accounts are essentially the same. Luke's account of the mustard seed is different in a major aspect and we will look at that in a few moments.

In the Middle East, the mustard seed was proverbially the smallest of all things, though in fact it was not. However, it was used as a point of reference in this part of the world for anything infinitesimally small.

In Matthew and Mark, the clear point of the parable is the fact that in time the smallest seed grows into the largest of herbs. Mustard in Palestine is not a garden herb, but a field crop. It grows easily to a height of eight feet with branches of a tree. And birds come and nest in its branches; they love the little black seeds they pick from the pods. So the first lesson the parable is that though a thing may start from the smallest beginnings it may end up being something great. We, here in California, experience this in the giant redwoods towering hundreds of feet in the air, which grew from seeds that fell on the ground two thousand years ago.

When Jesus was telling this parable, he was conveying a special message to his disciples. They were bewildered and discouraged. They had hoped for so much and so little had happened. Even the little that had happened was in danger of being engulfed by the growing opposition to Jesus. The mission of John the Baptist had

July 27, 2011

been extremely impressive, crowds flocked out to listen to him and to accept his baptism. And John himself had clearly preached that greater days were ahead and greater things were to happen. He told them that his mission would decline and the one who came after him would do greater things.

With these accounts by John, the disciples could not help but be expecting impressive and sensational happenings. At first, when the crowds flocked after Jesus, it must have appeared that this was coming true. But as opposition increased, the crowds began to abandon Jesus and it became apparent that His mission that had started with such promise was likely to end in failure and disaster. And so it was that Jesus told this parable to help them see that the beginnings might seem small but no man knew to what they would grow. If His message took hold, they could not help but conclude that they were the small beginning and that everything depended on them.

Apart from the truth that the parable sent to the disciples, it is a truth that is universal. The greatest things start with the smallest beginnings. Our music starts with the eight notes forming the octave. Our literature starts with the twenty-six letters comprising our alphabet. We live in an age that seeks size and numbers. Yet history shows us that it is not the big things but the small beginnings that are of great importance.

Our nation had its genesis on December 11, 1620 aboard a ship called the Mayflower with 101 people seeking religious liberty. History has shown what that little ship with that little group has done to change the world, more than all the Titanics in the centuries to come.

Think of the few people who have heard or seen Jesus. The total number of His followers after His resurrection and ascension was

July 27, 2011

one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15), less than the number of members on Immanuel's official church rolls or about the number of our attendance at the All Together Worship on a good Sunday. Today in our world of television, a person with an important message can reach millions. Out of that small beginning came the Christian Church as we know it today. We must never be discouraged by small beginnings and by the apparently infinitesimal effect that we can have. If a thing is right it has God behind it and in the end it will make its mark.

Measured from hour to hour, and day to day, we cannot see the mustard seed growing. But when we compare the beginning with the end, the growth is plain to see. We live in an age where we want to see instant results...lose 40 pounds in 30 days, double our investment returns every year. Great things seldom happen that way.

If you recall your physics class and one of Lord Kelvin's experiments, you can see the cumulative effects of small efforts. He made a bunch of paper pellets about the size of a pea. He hung a large paper weight and began to pelt the mass of iron with the paper pellets. At first nothing happened but after a time it began to vibrate, then it began to sway until eventually it was swinging freely. We may think that all we can do is so little as to be ineffective. But the cumulative effect of the small efforts of every person can be used mightily by God in bringing in His kingdom.

What is the relevancy of this parable to the church today in bringing in the His kingdom? We live in a society where things are manufactured and sold as "one size fits all." The church down through the years has adopted a somewhat similar approach to the matter of conversion. They have taken one type of experience and insist that it alone is the pattern to which all other experience must fit.

July 27, 2011

How many of us have experienced the blinding flash that Saul encountered on the road to Damascus? Stop and think...what was Saul doing at the time on the road...he was en-route to a mission of persecuting Christians and destroying the infant Christian community. His conversion was one which literally turned his life upside down. Many of the early converts were heathens with a set of creeds and ethical system that did not involve a higher power. Their conversions were also sudden and an abrupt change from their former beliefs.

These conversions may still be the case among society today. But what about the children who are brought up in a Christian home, prayed as their parents taught them, attended Sunday School, never took the Lord's name in vain, never sought to destroy Christ or the Christian church...what about these individuals? Thoreau, when asked, "Have you made your peace with God?" replied, "I never knew that He was my enemy."

These represent two different ways in building up the church of Jesus Christ. In the first instance, man comes from a position of hostility to Christ to a position of love for Christ. In the second example, the children grow in the nurture of a Christian environment in which their roots sink deeper and deeper into Christianity as they learn more and more about Jesus Christ until that day when they make their personal decision in a natural manner to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

There is more than one way to open the door into a room. We can make a violent entrance by jerking it open or kicking it down or we can open it gradually, little by little, until the room is open to our view. Not everyone needs an experience as Saul in his conversion to Paul. Persons who have known about Christ can blossom like a flower, petal by petal, until they know Christ.

July 27, 2011

I mentioned at the beginning that Luke's version of this parable was different in a major aspect. He made no reference to the smallness of the seed. His point was that some day the birds of the air came and lodged in the branches. In eastern thought one of the commonest pictures was to depict a great tree with many branches; the birds on the branches signify the people who are part of a great empire and who find peace and safety within it. Luke's idea is that the parable means the Kingdom is like a great tree with many branches in which people shall find peace and rest.

This is a great thought. By implication it means that it does not matter how many branches there are in the Church so long as they are all stemmed in Christ. This also serves as a warning against exclusiveness. So often people insist that their way is the only way and their Church is the only true one. John Wesley said, "You can be saved in any Church and you can be damned in any Church. What matters is, how is your heart with Christ."

The fact that we have so many branches should be looked upon as a great virtue and blessing. Not all people worship alike. The important thing is that the person finds God. The diversity is the glory of our Church when stemmed in Christ.

In World War II, regimental traditions were a source of pride. And it was good to identify with the history of the unit. But we never lost sight of the fact that the regiment was a part of a larger unit...the division, and the division was a part of larger units, the corps, the Army, the Army Group, the Theater Army, and the Theater.

Always remember that it is Christ who unites us, the tree in whom all the branches are stemmed and from whom all draw their life.

July 27, 2011

To understand the second parable, we need to return with Jesus to his home village. In villages and small towns, baking was a household activity. There was no Van de Kamp or La Brea Bakery, or a super market where you could get a loaf of Oro-Wheat bread. I am sure that Jesus, as He was growing up, had seen His mother Mary baking bread. In home making bread, one takes leaven, dough left over from a previous baking which has fermented and inserts it into the dough as a rising agent. This changes the character of the dough. So Jesus is saying, *“Just as leaven changes the character of the dough into which it is inserted, so the Kingdom changes all things.”*

This raises a theological dichotomy in that leaven in Hebrew thought and language was a synonym for evil influence. In preparing for Passover, every scrap of leaven had to be swept out of the house. At the same time, there is a Rabbinical saying, “Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as the leaven is to the dough.” We also find this allusion to evil in the New Testament. In Mark 8:15, Jesus warned His disciples to be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:6, uses the phrase, *“...a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough,”* and a similar phrase in Galatians 5:9 when he was admonishing people to have nothing to do with evil influences. This negative reference probably had to do with the fact that leaven introduced decay into that which it was placed.

Bible scholars seem to feel that Jesus was telling His followers of the disturbing influence of His teachings. Even though at first, the leaven is hidden and nothing appears to happen, the reality is its slow imperceptible process. Soon the whole mass swells and bubbles as fermentation rapidly advances. As the leaven turned the dough into a seething mass, so the influence of Christianity is profoundly disturbing. When Christianity first came to Thessalonica the cry was, *“These men who have turned the world*

July 27, 2011

*upside down have come here also,...*” (Acts 17:6). In Phillipi the accusation against Paul and his associates was, “*These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city...*” (Acts 16:20). Real religion is always disturbing. We should always remember that true Christianity is always revolutionary.

E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India, points out that one of the most revolutionary documents is found in the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55). Take a look at these three verses (v. 51-53): “*He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.*” In these three verses are three revolutions which true Christianity is called to carry out.

There is first a *moral* revolution. The proud are brought down. Christianity works a revolution within a man’s own heart. It does that by making him see who he really is. When a man meets Jesus Christ he cannot help but compare his life with the life of Jesus and the comparison speaks for itself. When we set our lives beside the life of the Lord of all good life we know how far we have fallen short. When a man realizes the love of God in Christ and the lengths to which that love went, he cannot help but be amazed that this was done for him. And he must then be filled with a desire to change himself until somehow he becomes worthy of a sacrifice like that.

Secondly, there is the *social* revolution. The mighty are brought low and those of low degree are exalted. Christianity has no respect for the labels that the world attaches to man. It rates a man by the service that he renders to his fellow men. “*...whoever would be first among you must be slave of all*” (Mark 10:44). The bottom line is that the man whom the world deems great may well

July 27, 2011

be worthless in the Kingdom of God, while the man who appears of no standing in the world may be the greatest.

There is told the story of a Russian nobleman who kept open house. Everyone was welcome. When each guest arrived, the nobleman would say, "Show me your hands." If the hands were worn and calloused, the guest received a high place; but if the hands were soft and flabby, he was directed to the lowest seat. So, the test in the Kingdom is the test of service.

Then there is the *economic* revolution. The hungry are filled with the good things and the rich are sent away empty. In the true Christian society there would be such a feeling of responsibility that no one could bear to have too much while others had too little. Businesses would run not for the owners only but to support the needs of the community; farmers would till not only for financial gain, but also to feed a hungry world. Doctors and lawyers would serve to heal and help those in distress. Every activity would be directed to the healing, the helping and supplying of the spiritual and physical needs of mankind. This would crown every task its glory. He would be greatest who was the greatest servant of all. An economic revolution is a Christian mission.

If you take the leaven as a disturbing influence in the dough, this parable teaches the disturbing influence of Christianity on the life of an individual and the life of the world.

It may be argued that the parable also stands for the imperceptible influence of the Kingdom. In a near term observation, we can no more see the leaven working than we can see a flower growing, but we know it is working all the time. When we look at the day-to-day changes, we may not see much, or for that matter, even year-to-year. But if we look at the world as a matter of historical record, the world is better. Despite the abuses in the name of Christianity, it is better because of the positive Christian influence.

July 27, 2011

The cruel and merciless customs of the world two thousand years ago have been eradicated or significantly reduced because of Christianity. Christian ideals have so permeated society that certain things can no longer be entertained in civilized society. Imperceptibly but surely, the influence of the Kingdom is there.

Like leaven, the influence for change must come from within. Before the leaven can have any effect, it must be inserted into the dough mass. We live in an age where we place emphasis on external change as primary. We believe that better housing and working conditions will make better men. Granted these are desirable objectives, but everything would be lost if we do not change the heart of man. The primary function of Christianity is to make new men and women. If that is done, then new and better conditions will follow. To do otherwise is to put the cart before the horse.

The dough has no power to change itself. The power to change it, the leaven, had to come from the outside. In like manner, men have no power to change themselves. Our new year's resolutions and other pie in the sky plans attest to the futility of man's sole effort. If we are to be changed that change must come from a power that is greater than ours, the power of Christ. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."* (2 Corinthians 5:17). The risen Christ said, *"Behold, I make all things new"* (Rev. 21:5).

Sadly, we read daily of how corporate executives, leadership of government at all levels have been blinded by the lure of big money...men and women, entrusted to be good stewards of all God's creation, who have placed self interests before the welfare of the public.

Glory be to God! Amen.

July 27, 2011

References: “All the Parables of the Bible,” H. Lockyer; “The Gospel of Luke, Rev. Ed.”, W. Barclay; “And Jesus Said,” W. Barclay; “The Gospel According to Mark,” “The Gospel According to Luke,” The New International Commentary; “Matthew,” J.N. Davies, “Mark,” J.N. Davies, “Luke,” J.A. Findlay, The Abingdon Bible Commentary; also 072810.