“Kingdom of Dirt: Mustard Seeds, Yeast, Treasure and Pearls”

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

July 26, 2020

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asked his disciples. “Yes.” They replied. But do you think it was an enthusiastic “YES!” or more of a “….yes?”

We’ve been hearing Jesus’ parables all month as we’ve been worshipping with the theme “The Kingdom of Dirt.” As the disciples listened to these parables, along with great crowds, Jesus sought to meet them, as any good teacher would, at their level, using examples grounded in the everyday, ordinary things of their lives.

We’ve heard how the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. Pastor Katie preached that in this text, the kingdom of heaven is a surprise, where expectations are reversed. It’s where those who are last in line find themselves recipients of grace upon grace. Where all work is honorable, and honored, and landowners are generous beyond all understanding. It’s *not* like the kingdoms of this world.

We’ve heard how in the kingdom of heaven, God’s abundant grace, is sown in us and around us, during all seasons of our lives, the fertile and the fallow. We’ve heard how we might be the sower, the soil, or the seeds, in the very ordinary work of being a disciples of Jesus.

We’ve heard how the kingdom of heaven is like someone who sows good seed. Pastor Katie preached that the Kingdom of Heaven is a political reality here and now, marked by the ethics of compassion and mercy, meant to be actively participated in by the followers of Jesus.

Ok. Good messages. But then today, we get 5 more parables all at once. Mustard seeds, yeast, hidden treasure, pearls, and fish. It seems that Jesus is trying to give enough examples so that any type of person who is listening could have a point of connection. He speeds towards the end of today’s lecture as if he’s saying “one more time for the people in the back!” But what exactly is the message that Jesus is trying to drive home? What is it that the disciples are affirming that “YES!” they understand?

When I read this text, I hear more of a “…yes?” from the disciples then a “YES!” What else do you say when your teacher asks if you’ve got it, after they tried 10 different ways of getting you to understand? I imagine that their heads were spinning a little trying to keep up. Yes, I get it…but do I?

These parables point to the truth that the kingdom of heaven grows and spreads from the small, even hidden, realities of our lives. Jesus tells many stories to try and communicate what that might look like. Perhaps one of these: mustard seeds, yeast, hidden treasure, pearls, or fish, is the treasure you need to hear today, as you seek the kingdom of heaven in your life, growing in and transforming the world around you. Perhaps there is something you can say, “yes” to today.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 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.”

Mustard plants were considered weeds. They are good at hiding in a handful of other types of seeds. When sown, they take root and grow into big bushy plants. They’re invasive and unpredictable, popping up in the middle of neatly planted fields. And then they provide shelter in a place not intended to be a safe haven. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

When you hear the word “yeast” in this story, think more along the lines of a sourdough starter. A small amount of this starter is mixed in with three measures of flour, which is enough to make at least 100 loaves of bread, until it was all leavened, effected by the starter, unable to go back to just being regular flour. Surely it was not just leavened, but baked, perhaps by a woman in a village where all were fed that day. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

The surprise of the discovery of this treasure changed the trajectory of the finder’s life. They were so determined to keep the treasure they discovered, they were willing to sell everything they had. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

In this parable, the treasure is not a surprise-it’s something the merchant has been diligently searching for. When discovered, he too is willing to sell everything he had to possess it. With this purchase, he is no longer a merchant, but a man who has found exactly what he was searching for. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age.”

The net catches ALL the fish-fish of every kind. It isn’t up to the fish to decide whether or not they will be brought ashore. It isn’t up to the fish to figure out who is good and who is bad. The bad were thrown out, back into the water, where the net will be cast again. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The kingdom of heaven is invasive and unpredictable. It brings abundance for the whole community to enjoy. It is of great value, worth more than all our possessions. It is for ALL-God will sort out the good and evil. It is here and now, and it is later and forever. It is for sowers of seeds, women baking bread, fortune seekers, merchants, and fishermen. It is found in the ordinary small realities of everyday life and grows exponentially among and around us.

In our world right now, a virus, small and invisible to the eye has grown rapidly into, as Dr. Holly Hearon writes in her commentary on this passage, “a destructive force that consumes all our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, nations, and as a world.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is not one of the “from small things come big beginnings” moments. This is not what that the kingdom of heaven is like.

These parables give us “a counter-image to this destructive force.”[[2]](#footnote-2) God’s kingdom springs up in our lives from small, hidden realities as we go about our work. God’s kingdom is worthy of all our attention and resources. It is a force that will not be stopped by covering our faces or starting school virtually, or doing the impossible dance of full-time parenting, work, and teaching your children. It is a force that will not be put on pause just because we stay home. It hides and surprises us in everything we do, like a mustard seed, like buried treasure or a precious pearl hidden among the rest, like a sourdough starter mixed in with the flour, like a tasty fish amid the whole catch.

Have we understood all this? “…yes?”

The small realities of our lives have changed in the last few months. What at first seemed like unknown territory, is now everyday life. In my family, this looks like a lot of time at home, wearing masks when we go out, becoming very proficient at video conferencing, and recording on my back deck. As a church, you’ve watched your pastors and staff develop our first few live and rocky attempts into finely tuned pre-recorded worship services. In March, April, and May, we spent a lot more time with the “what ifs” and “whens.” Now we find ourselves in the “how to make this work” and “what now?” stage. Every decision weighs risks, needs, and wants in completely new ways. Living in this crisis mode makes it hard to think beyond now. But in the small realities of this new way of life together, I know there are hidden seeds and rising bread and precious treasure.

There’s a group of PHPC moms meeting faithfully every week on zoom, connecting in ways they never would have been able to in-person commuting across Gwinnett County. We are joined in worship by friends, family, and neighbors we have never met all across the country on Sunday mornings. Or later on Sunday. Or Monday night when we finally find a sabbath moment to sit down and worship, and it’s worship all the same. Laundry Love is back in action at Kim’s Laundromat with well-planned precautions and the Lil’ Free pantry is getting filled, emptied and restocked faster than ever. I am relishing back yard visits with youth and their families over the joy of an ice cold King of Pops popsicle, spending time together we would not have found before. Is this what the Kingdom of heaven is like right now? Have I understood this? Yeah?

Jesus says at the end of these parables, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Every time we return to scripture, these old treasures water our roots, give us energy, and encourage growth. But these parables about the kingdom of heaven are not meant to be set in stone, to be understood with a singular meaning once and for all. Instead, they open our senses to the new treasure around us, in the ordinary, small, hidden realities of our own lives, even in the midst of unordinary times. It is ok to let our “yes” be a “YES” or a “…yes?” as we look for where our invasive, abundant, surprising, and good God is tucked away in our everyday lives.

1. Holly Hearon, Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4512> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)