

“Kingdom of Heaven” - Matthew 13.31-33 – Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs

In these brief parables Jesus tries to show the disciples some things about the Kingdom of Heaven. A tiny mustard seed becomes a bush, tiny yeast puffs up a batch of dough. A modern kingdom parable could be Habitat for Humanity and the story of founder Millard Fuller from his book *No More Shacks*. What started in the 1960's as one man's dream became a world-wide movement that has now built millions of homes around the world. I have helped work on houses in a couple of my previous locations and tried to help here in Frederick this week, but they are not at the point of using volunteers at their current project. So, I went yesterday and helped out at their ReStore.

So, what seed is God planting in us today, and calling us to grow? The mustard seed and mustard plant parable today seems to be about the mystery of kingdom growth, the mustard seed image is about the initial misconception of insignificance. Yet the day will come when the results of the kingdom's silent, steady growth will be impressive. Meanwhile don't be surprised if the seeds you plant today look ineffective. Don't be surprised if the witness you have to offer gets laughed at on account of looking so small. It's like the old fairy tale of "Jack and the Beanstalk". Jack's mother scorns the tiny beans he brings home from the market. They could never live off those! So, in anger she hurls them out the window. For her, those beans were a non-starter, a mistake, and a waste. Except that, of course, they ended up sprouting into a beanstalk that went, in a sense, clear up to heaven. What seemingly worthless seeds is God, with the help of God's people, planting around here?

There is an old story about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque little village who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men ever born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies." A simple question brought a profound answer. There are no instant heroes whether in this world or in the Kingdom of God. Growth takes time. Remember, God is still working on us. Let me suggest that the next time you pray the Lord's Prayer, instead of praying, "Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth"...think or say "Thy kingdom come in me." May we be in the business of helping God build the Kingdom of Heaven here.

Some years ago, a study was done by an agricultural school in Iowa. It reported that production of a hundred bushels of corn from one acre of land required 500,000 gallons of water, 6,800 lbs. of oxygen, 5,200 lbs. of carbon, 160 lbs. of nitrogen, and other elements too numerous to list. In addition to these ingredients are required rain and sunshine at the right times. Although many hours of the farmer's labor are also needed, it was estimated that only 5 percent of the produce of a farm can be attributed to the efforts of the farmer. So it is in spiritual realms: God causes the growth. The Apostle Paul wrote, *I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow.* (1 Cor. 3:6-7). Friends we are here to help God grow God's church. If you think about it, what started small as a group of 12 disciples has now grown to over a billion Christians worldwide today!

What yeast today might help us to rise to the occasion? What is the active ingredient that is needed. I believe it is the Holy Spirit. The essence of God in us and working through us. M. Scott Peck told a story in his book *The Different Drum* entitled "The Rabbi's Gift." The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, it had declined to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying monastery: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. As he was leaving the abbot asked, "Is there nothing you can

tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you." When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks asked, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of love to redeem a situation. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of grace to bring about healing. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of respect to bring out the best in people. Where might you add a little yeast to help raise someone up? Alleluia and Amen.

O God, We Pray

Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs 7/10/23

O God, we pray, "thy kingdom come."
Right here upon the earth.
Help us to see that it's in us,
And see our sacred worth.

Jesus talked of the mustard seed,
A little, tiny thing.
A little yeast within the dough,
Lifts all with its rising.

In us, Lord, may your kingdom come.
We are your harvest field.
May your seed of faith in us grow,
When to you, O Lord, we yield.

May we see you whenever we,
Look on each other's face,
And spread your kingdom wherever,
We go out from this place.