

Growing Christ's Kingdom
Luke 13:18 – 21
Sunday, November 25, 2018

There's a story about a king who had two sons. As he was growing older, he knew that he had to choose which one of them would take over as king after him. So he called them before him and said, "Before I die, I will crown one of you as king. You are both good men with your own unique gifts, so I will give you a test. Each of you will get three gold coins. Go to the marketplace and buy something that will fill my whole house. Whoever can do *that* by the end of the day will inherit my kingdom."

So his sons went to the marketplace. The first son looked at these big, beautiful rugs that would fill his father's whole house. But they were so expensive, and he only had three gold coins. Everything else he looked at, the things he could afford, were far too small to fill the whole house. He grew frustrated and said, "What my father asks is *impossible!* There is no way I can find something that will fill the whole house for only three gold coins!" So the day ended, and he went back to his father empty-handed.

The other son wandered the marketplace all day. Like his brother, he looked at the big things that were too expensive, and he looked at the things he could afford that would not fill the whole house. The day was ending, the sun was going down, and it was getting dark. And that's when he finally found it. He made his purchase and ran back to his father.

The sons came before their father the king, and he said to them, "Show me what you have found." The first son said, "Father, what you asked was too hard, and I could not do it." The second son set before his father a box that was filled with candles. They set them all throughout

the house and lit them, and the candles filled the whole house with light. And the king said to him, “*You* will inherit my kingdom.”

Today is Christ the King Sunday, where we celebrate Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and we talk about what it means to live our lives in his kingdom, under his power and authority. And when *Jesus* talks about the kingdom of God, he’s not just talking about *heaven* or some time in the future (although that is *part* of it). Jesus talks about the kingdom of God as God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. When we do God’s will, here and now, we are living our lives in the kingdom of God, under the rule and reign of God.

The challenge is, how do we *do* that? How do we live our lives according to *God’s* will as opposed to *our own* will or *somebody else’s* will? How do we know what God is calling us to do and *do* it? That can seem *impossible*. It reminds me of when Paul says to the Romans, “*I know* what is good and right, but I cannot *do* it.” It’s easy to *say* that we should only do what God is calling us to do and live every aspect of our lives according to God’s will, but the *reality* is, that seems impossibly hard. But maybe that’s because, like that king’s first son, we’re only looking at the big, impressive stuff. And what *Jesus* shows us is something very different.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” I happen to *have* a mustard seed here. You see it? No, you can’t. It’s way too small. And that’s the point. Jesus compares the kingdom of God – doing God’s will in our lives – to an incredibly small seed. Because maybe doing God’s will starts small. It starts with some small, simple act of faith – a prayer, a kind word, a phone call to someone who is lonely, sitting with someone at

lunch, a hug for someone who is hurting, or even just asking, “God, what are you calling me to do?” Maybe doing God’s will in your life starts *there*, with something simple and small.

Because Jesus says that tiny seed will grow into a *tree*. Now, here’s the thing about that: that’s impossible. Seriously, it is *impossible* for a mustard seed to grow into a *tree*. That just doesn’t happen. At most, mustard seeds grow into large bushes that can be maybe five or six feet tall. But not a *tree*. What Jesus is telling us here is not humanly possible. No matter how much you water it and tend the soil, no matter how hard you work, you will not be able to grow a mustard seed into a tree. But maybe what he’s saying here is that the results aren’t up to us. That when you start with some small, simple gesture of faith, God can *take* that and do something with it that you do not even think is possible. It is not our effort that produces the outcome. It is God at work *in* us, in that *situation*. When we open ourselves up to God, give ourselves over to God’s will, even in the *smallest* ways, God can do something amazing with that.

It’s like this next parable that Jesus tells about the woman with the yeast. He says that the kingdom of God “is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Three measures of flour is about *fifty pounds*. Scholars estimate that it would make enough bread to feed 150 people. This is *a lot* of flour. How much yeast would it take to leaven fifty pounds of flour? Jesus doesn’t tell us. He simply says that the woman “mixes in” some yeast. But when he says, “mixes in,” it’s the Greek word *ekrupten*, which literally means, “to hide or conceal.” So we’re not talking about putting *a lot* of yeast in. She puts in an amount that is barely noticeable (because she’s not supposed to be putting it in at all; we’ll get to that in just a minute). But this tiny amount that she puts in leavens the *whole thing*.

While that's not as impossible as a mustard seed growing into a *tree*, it's pretty unlikely. But maybe what Jesus is saying here is that your contribution, what you give of yourself to God, this gesture of faith, this seed that you plant, it might *seem* insignificant. You might feel like it's not much. It might escape the notice of others around you. But again, the results aren't up to *us*. They're up to *God*. What we contribute and offer to God *spreads*, not by our own effort, but by the *grace* and the *Spirit* of God. God can take *whatever* we have to offer and do something amazing and unlikely and impossible with it.

And when I say *whatever* we have to offer, I mean *whatever*. You notice that this woman *hides* the yeast in the flour. Why does she do that? Why does she *hide* it? Throughout scripture yeast has negative associations. When God is about to kill all the firstborn of Egypt to set the people of Israel free from slavery, he commands the people not to put yeast in their bread. Jesus, over and over again, warns about the *yeast* of the Jewish religious leaders or of King Herod, these teachings or behaviors that *puff up* and make someone *look good*, but there's no actual *substance* there. Throughout scripture, for the most part, yeast is something to be *avoided*.

So this woman *hides* some yeast in the flour, and it leavens the whole thing, and *that* is the kingdom of God. Because God can take even our secrets, the things we try to hide and keep others from noticing, the things we think of as *negative*, and even *that* can become a part of God's kingdom. God can use *whatever* we have to offer, even that which we don't think God *would*, *could*, or *should* use. God can use *all of it*, everything about us, to build up God's kingdom.

It's like when Jesus says that the result of the *mustard seed* is that birds of the air will make nests in its branches. Now, when Jesus talks about "birds of the air," he's not talking about cute birds

like doves or blue jays or parakeets. All throughout Jewish scripture, the term “birds of the air,” like yeast, has *negative* connotations. It is always used in reference to *unclean* birds, birds of *prey*, birds that you should not eat or have any contact with. Jesus is telling people that the kingdom of God is a home for unclean animals. Because maybe the goal of our small, simple gestures of faith is to make room for others, especially those who do not belong. When you open yourself up to God, to doing God’s will, it’s never just for *you*, so that *you* can grow into a big, strong, faithful tree. It’s always for *others*. So that, through you, those who feel like they do not belong can find shelter and love in the kingdom of God.

We start doing God’s will in our lives, not with big, grand gestures, but with small, simple acts of faith and love. Whatever you have to offer of yourself to God, however insignificant or even shameful it might feel, God can take that and do something more than you can imagine with it. Because when you open yourself up to God like that – when you do God’s will in small, simple ways – it’s like a candle that fills the whole house with light. And when you shine that light into the world, you will inherit God’s kingdom.