

7-30-17 Sermon – “Learning to be Weeds” – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

Many of you will remember that when we left off with Jesus two weeks ago, he was beginning to teach the crowds using parables. He starts with the Parable of the Sower, which several of you reenacted in what I’m sure is soon to be a Tony-award-nominated performance. And when we meet up again with Jesus in today’s Gospel reading, he’s on quite a roll with the parables; we hear four different in today’s lesson! “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” Jesus says; “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.” “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field; it is like a merchant who comes across a pearl of great value.”

Nearly all of the parables begin this way: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” The kingdom of heaven (or the Kingdom of God) is the subject of the vast of Jesus’ parables. And therefore, it’s important for us to remember that when Jesus talks about, “the kingdom of heaven,” he’s not describing some place in the sky that we go when we die. This kingdom Jesus depicts is not a place; it’s more of a time, or a reality: the *reign* of God. It’s what God intends and desires for creation; what the world will look like when God is King.

The kingdom of heaven is a mysterious thing – a future hope, and yet at the same time a spiritual reality that is already beginning to break into our broken, fallen world. And what’s interesting to me, as I listen to Jesus’ parables, is that he speaks spiritual truth, but he does so using ordinary objects and characters from daily life. These parables don’t feature talking animals like Aesop’s fables, and there are no gods and goddesses in disguise like in Greek and Roman mythology. Instead, Jesus’ parables are about ordinary people like you and like me. A woman baking bread, a man plowing a field; a seed growing, and a merchant buying and selling his inventory. It seems that Jesus *intentionally* uses elements that are ordinary to describe that which is extraordinary.

Several clergywomen in the presbytery and I are reading a book together. It’s a book by Christian writer Diana Butler Bass called *Grounded: Finding God in the World*. Each chapter is devoted to something very mundane and ordinary: dirt, water, neighborhoods, etc. And for each of these basic, mundane parts of life, Bass shares stories from Scripture and from her own experience where people of faith have encountered God in the ordinary. She points out God is present in our homes, and in our families, and in the simplest interactions with our neighbors. Which means, she says, that these ordinary things – like water, and family, and air – are in fact *extraordinary*, and sacred. “If you want to see God,” Bass says, “You don’t need to go to the top of a mountain and stare off into heaven.” If it’s God we seek, we’d be better off looking down at where our own two feet are planted.

I think this is what Jesus is trying to convey with his parables. I think he’s teaching us to see the sacred – the very kingdom of heaven – in the most ordinary of places. In Jesus Christ, we witness incarnation, the Word of God Made Flesh: all the glory of the divine in human skin and bones. And so, in telling these parables, Jesus says to us: “Incarnation is not just about me; I’m not the only place where the mundane meets the sacred. Look around you – this miracle takes place in everything God created! Look within yourself; look at the face of your neighbor. For you, too, are God’s holy, ordinary, sacred creation.”

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. In these first two parables Jesus tells us today, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...the kingdom of heaven is like yeast...” the imagery he’s using isn’t just ordinary; it’s downright shocking! You and I may have a romanticized vision of mustard seeds in particular because they appear in Scripture, but for Jesus’ first listeners in the crowd that day, mustard seeds and yeast would not have been positive images.

Take yeast, for example. We think of fluffy, melt-in-your-mouth bread. But yeast in Jesus' time was considered something that "corrupts", a little bit of spoiled bread set aside to leaven the next loaf. Let it spoil too much, and you may not live to see that next batch of bread. Nearly every other time that yeast is mentioned in Scripture, it is part of a negative comparison. Jesus tells his disciples: "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees", aka do not let their teachings corrupt your faith. The popular adage: "A little yeast leavens the loaf," that the Apostle Paul quotes is tantamount to my grandmother warning me that "One bad apple spoils the bunch."

Likewise with the mustard seed. Contrary to Matthew's poetic description, mustard seeds don't grow up into big, beautiful trees. They're more like shrubs, or bushes. And truth be told, farmers in first-century Palestine did not plant mustard *on purpose*. Mustard was a weed that sprang up in their fields alongside the crops a farmer intended to sow. Because a mustard seed is so small, it could easily find its way into sacks of larger seeds and go undetected...until that pesky shrub sprang up. By then, well, you've got an invasive weed sown into your field! As one commentator describes it, mustard plants were like the kudzu of Jesus' time – an absolute nuisance to get rid of. The kingdom of heaven, as it turns out, is a persistent and frustrating weed.

Have you ever felt like a weed? Been treated like a weed, maybe? Like you didn't matter, or were somehow 'in the way'? Have you had the experience of someone trying to tell you that you are worth less than they are? Perhaps because of the color of your skin, or your gender, or the size or shape of your body? Because of your accent, or your level of education? Because of how you see the world, or where you come from – your religious and political beliefs?

Our world has created a measure for who is 'right' and who is 'wrong.' For who and what is acceptable, and who and what is not. For who is more valued, and who is less valued – or not valued at all. And most of us (myself included), even if we don't actively believe in the world's value system, find ourselves trying to 'adjust' to that worldview. To conform to the way society works. Perhaps we don't even realize we are adjusting. It's a survival method, the way we make it through.

But then, into our neatly-ordered, 'well-adjusted' worldviews, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into a glorious weed. The kingdom of heaven is like a little bit of 'corrupting' yeast that was hidden into three measures of flour until the whole thing was tainted with the stain of grace."

What might it look like for us to recognize the yeast and weeds of the kingdom of heaven in our world and community? To look into the eyes of ordinary people and see the face of Christ? To look with the eyes of the Gospel at those people that the powers-that-be have despised – have labeled as weeds, invading and corrupting *their* kingdoms – and to witness the very power and presence of God, growing and fermenting before our eyes?

I wonder if it might look like seeing God in the faces of people who come from somewhere different than we do. Like saying, "Thank you, God, for those people in our lives who come from 'somewhere else,' be it Oklahoma or Ireland, Maine or Mexico, because they bear your image. The image of your Holy Spirit who blew through the church at Pentecost, baptizing the people with fire, reminding your followers that you belong to every nation and that you speak every language under the sun. Blessing the church with the gift of diversity. Thank you, God. For we are better, the Kingdom is closer, because they are in our midst."

I wonder if it might look like recognizing God's presence in people who are living with disabilities. Like saying, "Thank you God, for our friends and family and neighbors who live with disabilities and bear your holy image. The image of Jesus Christ, who was crucified and

then rose from the grave with the wounds still in hands and feet and side. People whose bodies our world may call broken, but to whom you say, ‘This is *my* body. This is *my* blood.’ Thank you, God. For we are better, the Kingdom is closer, because they are in our midst.”

I wonder if it might look like seeing God in the faces of people who are transgender. Like saying, “Thank you, God, for your presence in our community embodied our transgender siblings, because they bear your image. The image of God the Creator, who said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, male and female’ – male *and* female – because no one gender could ever express all that there is to the divine. Thank you, God. For we are better, the Kingdom is closer, because they are in our midst.”

Yeast and weeds. Corrupting and interrupting the values of our world with the resplendent tarnish of God’s grace.

Friends, what might happen, for us as individuals and for us as a church, if we made a point to look around for those people, those events, those movements, that act as holy yeast and weeds in our midst? What might happen if we sought them out? If went to them and asked them, “Can you teach us? Please, teach us how to be weeds, how to be yeast, how to open ourselves up to the power and presence the Kingdom of God so that it can ferment and grow within us and around us. Teach us the Gospel, the good news. Teach us how to be maladjusted to a sick society.”

Our dominant culture says to the people it chooses to despise, “You are a weed. You are in the way, using up the resources – the soil, water, and sun – that the good crops need to grow.” Society says, “You are yeast. Your very presence corrupts us, taints us. We are better off without you.”

But Jesus says, “No, no, no. You who feel like weeds, you who are treated like yeast, you are *my children*, the bearers of my Kingdom. You are the ones slowly turning the world around, fermenting the world with God’s presence so that one day it *will* be ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”

The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like a weed that grows where we didn’t intend to plant it. It is like yeast that leavens the dough, like a corrupting fungus that acts invisibly in our world. The Kingdom of heaven is the constant presence of unpredictable and extravagant God. A God who turns conventional wisdom and values on their head, forever invading our orderly sense of how things work.

And friends, we who call Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior are citizens of that Kingdom. We are the ones who are called to plant mustard seeds and hide little measures of yeast in the bland flour of our world. We are the ones who can learn to be weeds, beautiful weeds, the greatest of shrubs, so that the God’s justice and peace can come and make nests in our branches.

And maybe, when we look a little closer at that tiny, ordinary mustard seed, perhaps we’ll recognize it for what it really is. It is a hidden treasure, buried in a field; it is a pearl of great price. It is the very Kingdom of heaven. Something so precious that it’s worth selling everything we own – including selling *out* on the values of a fallen world – so that we can seek it, and live it, and perhaps one day grow, ourselves, into God’s own precious, holy weeds. May it be so. Amen.