

Sermon: July 30, 2017
Small Beginnings; Big Results
Matthew 13:31-33; 44-49

The Kingdom of Heaven is the central theme of Jesus' earthly life and teachings. His miracles reveal the Kingdom at work and His teachings describe the nature of this Kingdom.

Today we hear a series of short parables, each of which reveals some aspect about the Kingdom of Heaven. As we delve into these parables or short stories, we discover the vision Jesus was proclaiming—a vision of which we are a part—a vision which transforms the way we live. We are challenged to let it get hold of us.

The first parable, comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed, makes the point that great results can come from small beginnings.

If you hold a mustard seed in your hand, it can hardly be seen. Yet within that tiny speck of matter are the makings of something big and dramatic. A mustard bush in the Middle East can often attain tree size—becoming 12 or more feet in height and 20 or so feet in horizontal coverage. How can all that be contained within a barely visible seed? There is tremendous power and potential in smallness. Jesus was sharing this parable to encourage His small band of disciples. He saw their potential—how they could reproduce themselves and become a great force in history which would convert not only the Roman Empire, but also impact the world of their future. The birds of the air represent people of all nations coming to Christ. The Gospel has transcended time and cultures speaking more compellingly to us than any human philosophy or political system. Yes, big results have come from small beginnings!

If we look back through the history of God's people, we find a consistent pattern. God often started with a single individual such as Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah and Esther—a single seed planted into the world—and from that individual, God produced results which changed history. Our lives are different because these individuals yielded themselves to God. Each of these men and women needed time to grow into the kind of person God was calling them to be. The same is true with any seed. A seed does not instantly achieve its destiny, but undergoes a process of being stretched, breaking its mold again and again to become something different and greater, yet in continuity with what it was.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not just something external to us that we can consider and analyze.

It is an impulse planted within each of us, beginning in an unseen way to influence us toward living out God's will. Gradually that impulse becomes a motive, influencing us to think and act habitually in God's way.

Eventually, that motive grows into a personal identity visible to others and we become God's instrument influencing the lives of others. That's how the Kingdom of Heaven grows and spreads itself on earth.

Jesus not only illustrated this truth in parables, He also lived it out personally and through His disciples. Jesus spent most of His earthly ministry nurturing the mustard seeds represented by His disciples. The disciples were not only insignificant in social standing, but also small minded—more often than not, missing the point. Yet Jesus was patient with them, just as He is with us.

We in today's Church aren't that much different from the disciples in our small mindedness as we become obsessed with trivia. Yet Jesus is patient with us as He endures our petty worries over things which have no ultimate value. It is easy to become frozen in a comfortable mold of spirituality or a particular world view shaped by our culture, or by our reaction to this culture. Yet we keep encountering Jesus over and over again in our consciousness challenging us to let the mold break so the seed represented by each of us can move on to the next stage of growth.

If we take to heart what Jesus said and did in His earthly life, the result makes us constantly uncomfortable with where we are at any given moment. What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Him? Doesn't it mean surrendering our pet ideas about making the world better for us?

Do we truly face the challenge of unconditional forgiveness of each other represented by Jesus urging us to forgive seventy times seven? Do we totally surrender self to live completely for others as Jesus does?

Jesus came into this world as a single mustard seed—planted in the forbidding soil of human callousness and cruelty—yet He not only survived its inevitable sentence to death on a cross, Jesus also took seed growing to a new level—breaking the mold—the mold structured on the assumption that death had the final say over any human life. Jesus' resurrection was a radical breaking of this mold which had confined the Kingdom of Heaven within a tiny insignificant seed. Jesus' resurrection unleashed an unprecedented flow of life-giving divine power which restored God's original purpose of creation—to create a community in eternal fellowship with Him.

Beginning with the resurrection of Jesus, this flow of life is touching each of us by neutralizing the fear of death which has dominated human consciousness throughout history. Let this resurrection consciousness introduced by Jesus dominate our thoughts, words, and actions. Then we will move toward fulfilling our potential as seeds planted by God in this world to grow as the Kingdom of Heaven. Each of us needs release from fearing death by recognizing that it is the seed's vocation to die to its original appearance so that it can become what it is intended to be—a visible proclamation of God's Heavenly Kingdom, rooted not in some ethereal heavenly realm, but established right here on this earth. God's final vision, revealed in the Book of Revelation, is not a depiction of us going to heaven, but a challenge for us to be an integral part of His bringing heaven to this transformed earth.

God's vision for His perfectly restored creation is a garden in which all its parts grow to their fullest potential in perfect harmony with one another. When human sin corrupted God's original Garden of Eden, all seemed lost. Creation appeared to be a noble experiment which had gone awry. It appeared that the only course was to end it all. Yet there was one seed planted which was producing good fruit--Noah. Thus God decided to spare Noah and his family from the flood disaster because Noah was willing to follow God's direction. Noah lived in a kingdom relationship of trust and obedience. Thus God promised Noah in a covenant that "Seedtime and harvest would not depart from the earth."(Genesis 8:22) It was more than an agricultural promise. With that promise, God began a historical process of sowing obedient people as seeds so that His Kingdom of Heaven would ultimately come forth as a harvest on earth.

The people who were sown were themselves sinners along with all of us, but they had hearts for God which enabled each of them to contribute to a growth process which is bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to fruition.

We're no different from people like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Esther and the other numerous biblical heroes. They were all flawed, yet they were willing to be sowed sometimes as single solitary seeds in hostile ground so that God's heavenly kingdom would gain an earthly foothold. You and I are part of this continuing tradition of divine seed sowing preparing for the great harvest when the Kingdom of Heaven will be visible to all on earth. WE are seeds of heaven's kingdom!

What can we do at this present moment to prepare for this great revealing of the Kingdom of Heaven? The other parables in today's Gospel give us some direction.

We are to see ourselves like the leaven described in the second parable in today's Gospel. That's a startling image considering the fact that leaven was often associated with evil and corruption in Jewish life. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was all about getting rid of the leaven in a Jewish house in order that the family would be pure for the Passover. When Jesus used leaven in a parable to describe the emerging Kingdom of Heaven, it certainly got His hearers attention. Yet Jesus was not proclaiming the Kingdom as a transforming agent for evil. What He is saying is that the Kingdom works in a hidden way to bring about dramatic results for good, just as a loaf of bread is made more attractive and edible by the presence of leaven in its baking. When we accept our role in God's Kingdom formation, (in spite of our sin and impurity symbolized by leaven) we are to be like leaven--being an unseen influence to bring about God's purpose and design.

In addition to accepting the role as a leavening agent in our society, we are to be aware of the message presented by the third and fourth parables in today's Gospel. The Kingdom of Heaven is worth sacrificing everything to be a part of it. The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price both make the same point. There is nothing in this world more desirable than God's Heavenly Kingdom. It is worth any earthly sacrifice to attain it. Both parables emphasize the joy of discovering the Kingdom of Heaven. The Parable of the Treasure seems to say that the Kingdom's discovery can occur unexpectedly and be a spontaneous surprise. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value on the other hand stresses that the Kingdom's discovery can be the result of our life-long search where we recognize the Kingdom's quality because of expertise attained by our careful study of God's word.

Knowledge of God's word helps us to discern the best pearls of wisdom to guide our lives. These two parables are complementary to each other because both are rooted in human experience.

The final parable in today's Gospel compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a fishing net gathering all kinds of fish.

We are not to worry about who comprises the Kingdom when the world as we know it comes to an end. The point is that all people will be brought before God's judgment through the Kingdom net and the separation of those good and evil will be certain. That is GOD'S job, not ours!

I titled this sermon "Small Beginnings; Big Results" because this is how God works in bring His Kingdom to pass in this world. There are times He works with a small faithful remnant or even a single individual. The most dramatic example of that is Jesus Himself who is the fullness of God among us.

Jesus laid down His life as a seed through the cross and enabled the release of His resurrection life into this world. Thus we can be truly free from living in fear of death because Jesus reduced death to a mere part of the process of Kingdom seed germination where seeds die to be transformed into forms far more beautiful and fruitful.

Today's parables of the Kingdom all bring good news to us. They are gospel! They promise life in all its fullest meaning to us. Let us accept Jesus' invitation to live in His Kingdom of Heaven for that is what this world is destined to become.