

If Jesus were taking one of my seminary classes in preaching, he'd probably be told that he needs to find just ONE lead image or full color picture for his talk about the kingdom and not pile up such dissimilar images. When preaching, students are told to use a rifle with a single bullet to hit the bullseye and not a shotgun that peppers birdshot all over the place, hitting lots of things in general but nothing in particular.

And indeed, in the latter portion of Matthew 13, Jesus is on something of a simile binge. The kingdom is . . . a mustard seed . . . a bit of yeast in dough . . . a hidden treasure . . . a pearl of great value . . . a net catching fish. Jesus here slides easily from the agricultural to the culinary to the marketplace and to the fishing trade. It all seems jumbled together.

Thankfully Jesus is not one of my fellow students because I'd hate to see what would happen in an academic critiquing of the teaching of my Lord! But even though Jesus is throwing out these various images at a fast and furious pace, he's also teaching one of the most remarkable truths that emerges from the gospel: namely, the unexpected hiddenness of the kingdom of God.

Jesus always made clear that the kingdom of God was going to save and rescue this world precisely by virtue of its being so very different from the powerful, flashy, showy political kingdoms which otherwise capture our attention. The kingdom of God, Jesus said, looks small, even tiny. It looks foolish. In fact, the kingdom can even disappear completely the way a seed gets *buried* in the soil. It takes 750 mustard seeds to equal one gram. Drop one of those little wisps into the dirt and you won't even be able to see it. The same is true of yeast in dough: once it's mixed into the water, flour, and oil, the yeast disappears—you could not separate it back out again (much less locate it) if you tried. Yet these tiny things have great effects.

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So also with the kingdom: it's not what you expect in terms of political clout. The kingdom of God is not about gleaming Gotham cities studded with marble columns and soaring executive mansions. It's not about some fierce army plowing under the opposition by sheer force of its power. Compared to all of that, God's kingdom looks as insignificant as a grain of mustard or a packet of dry yeast. But the kingdom can change hearts. It can change the world. It *has* changed the world.

The kingdom is here but it's modest. It's hidden. It's quiet. In fact, those who discover the kingdom sometimes tend to stumble upon it almost by accident. The kingdom is a great treasure, but you're not going to find this valuable commodity posted on the big board of Wall Street or for sale on Ebay. No, you're going to stumble on it in some remote field. The person who owns the field won't even know it's there, but once you find it, your joy will be so massive that you'll do whatever it takes to buy that field.

All of this is profoundly surprising. We are so accustomed to these images in Jesus' parables that they typically don't strike us as absurd or paradoxical. But they are. Think of it: the kingdom is a seed scarcely visible to the naked eye and which disappears completely in dirt. The kingdom is yeast which a *woman* kneads into dough. In Jesus' day so-called "woman's work" was disdained such that Jesus was being quite provocative by making a woman the agent of working the kingdom into this world.

And has it ever struck you that the man who finds the treasure in the field is a little devious? Jesus says that this man finds some treasure in a field that does not belong to him. He then covers up this treasure again so the owner won't know it's there and then, without saying a word, he buys this field from the unsuspecting owner. It's a little sneaky! Suppose you were at a garage sale looking over some old purses. But then suppose you discovered that inside one of those old purses was a wad of \$100 bills. Wouldn't you feel a little shady if you quickly purchased it for \$3

without telling the owner that she had missed a wee little something when cleaning out the purse?!

Tiny seeds, invisible yeast, woman's work, a slightly underhanded purchase: had it been left up to us, this is not how *we* would have described the single most powerful, meaningful, and joyful reality in the universe! But it is how Jesus described it. This is the kingdom Jesus opened to us. It is the kingdom he asked us to pray for and the kingdom in which we asked us to live out the will of God on earth every day.

A kingdom, Dallas Willard recently wrote in *The Divine Conspiracy*, is a place where one person's influence determines what happens. In the case of the kingdom of God, the kingdom is not- for now- a geographic spot on a map but rather the kingdom of God is present any place and every place where the influence of Jesus' living presence determines the shape of life. Wherever and whenever Jesus' wisdom, Jesus' wit, Jesus savvy, Jesus' words, and Jesus' love mold the words, actions, thoughts, and life patterns of some person or group of persons, then *there* is where God's kingdom is visible.

We've got to *show* the world how real the kingdom is by how we conduct ourselves. And the first, best way we can do that is to live as Jesus lived. Of course, Jesus did not reach everybody, and we surely won't either. To some Jesus appeared misguided, so will we appear to at least some. To others Jesus seemed characteristically ineffective (with all those quirky and confusing parables and that rag-tag group of loser fishermen and women of questionable repute who followed him around, go figure!). So also we may never come close to generating a fraction of the kind of the head-turning excitement that tingles people's spines every time Tom Cruise or Kim Basinger walks into a Los Angeles restaurant.

But we live the quiet, faithful, humble, service-oriented life of Jesus because it's what he's asked us to do!

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But we cannot close out our look at Matthew 13 without noticing that after piling up one fiercely quiet and subtle image after the next, Jesus concludes with an image where subtlety goes out the window. *There will come a time of reckoning at the end of all things, Jesus says. There will come a time when the "bad fish" will get tossed into a fate that is more than definitely on the grim side.* So in the long run, despite all Jesus had to say about the hiddenness of the kingdom in the here and now, the day will come when the kingdom will be the all in all and each person will either be in that kingdom or outside of it. We witness to the kingdom in ways consistent with the kingdom, which means lovingly and humbly and compassionately. But witness we must. The stakes are too high to stay quiet.

"Have you understood all these things" Jesus asked. hilariously the disciples reply with a simple "Yes," which you just know was not completely true! And to compound whatever foginess they may have had, Jesus then says that if you do understand all this, you'll be like a homeowner who brings out "new treasures as well as old." What that means is still a bit of a mystery even 2,000 years later!

"Have you understood all these things?" Sure. Yup. Got it.

Well, probably not. But even today we need to understand these things well enough to sense the glory of the kingdom's hidden nature and yet the absolute urgency of our pointing people to that kingdom every chance we get.

If we take our cues from Matthew 13, then it is clear that both our kingdom living and our kingdom proclamation will be more about quiet acts of loving faithfulness than about headline-grabbing, bullhorn tactics. We cannot present the gospel of a suffering servant like Jesus by being arrogant finger-waggers. We cannot give the world the good news of grace if we mostly position ourselves as stern bearers of bad news and judgment. The kingdom of God represents the most powerful force the

world has ever known. But we've got to let the kingdom grow and leaven in its own quiet, humble ways if people's hearts are really going to be changed.

And so as bearers of God's kingdom, we keep plugging away at activities which may look silly or meaningless to the world but which we believe contain the very seed of a new creation. We keep coming to church and singing our old hymns, reciting our old formulas and creeds, and trying new and old ways to bring the church to the center of community life. All of us who preach keep cracking open an ancient book called the Bible, looking to find within it truths that are anything but ancient. We keep gathering at sick beds and death beds- and gravesides- and whisper our prayers for the Spirit of the resurrection to be with us in life and in death. We keep drizzling water onto squirming infants and popping pieces of bread into our mouths in the earnest faith that through the Spirit baptism and communion don't just mean something, as a means of grace, they mean *everything*.

And we keep working for Jesus in this mixed-up, backward world of ours. We quietly carry out our jobs and raise our kids and tend our families in the belief that God has designs for all those things and it's our job to follow them. We keep pointing people to an old rugged cross, having the boldness to suggest that the man who died on that cross is now the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

(various sources, freely adapted)