

Sermon, August 14, 2022

Luke 13:18-21

“Mustard Seeds and Yeast”

The kingdom of God - the kingdom of God appears 100 times throughout the New Testament, about 70 times by Jesus. It is the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is referred to as the kingdom of heaven, but the two are interchangeable. For example, in Jesus' discussion with the rich young man, he says, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”.

But what did he mean by this phrase? First, the use of the word ‘kingdom’ in an English translation, might give the impression that he is talking about a place. It's probably more accurate to speak of it as the ‘reign’ of God. Each and every week we say in the Lord's Prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. In other words, the reign of God is about the will of God being done here on earth.

In the gospels Jesus never gives a concrete answer to the question, what is the kingdom of God? He always responds with a parable, as he does in this morning's reading, comparing it to a mustard seed and yeast. In fact, in the fourth chapter of Matthew we are told that he always taught in the form of a parable but explained the meaning to his disciples in private.

Again, in the Lord's Prayer, we say, “thy kingdom come”, recognizing that he spoke of it as something that comes to us, not that to which we go. This is not to deny that we go to heaven when we have passed on, but that when he speaks of the kingdom of God coming, he is talking about something to be experienced here on earth.

In Matthew 4:17 he says, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” I believe that what he means by that is that it is near by virtue of the fact that he is there in the midst of them. In him we see the values inherent in the kingdom. To say “thy kingdom come” implies that it is near by virtue of his presence, but not yet fulfilled.

To further complicate matters, in Matthew 17:20-21 we hear, “once Jesus was asked when the kingdom was coming and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is! or, “There it is!”, For in fact the kingdom of God is among you.” In some translations it says that the kingdom of God is ‘within’ you. To say that the kingdom is among you suggests it is a shared experience, as being among us as a congregation, while to say it is within you points to the idea that we experience it as an individual. I believe that it is both. In Matthew 7:21, he says, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father

who is in heaven.” Again, the kingdom has to do with the will of God being done on earth, both, by us as individuals and as a group of people.

Now, turning to today’s parables, what is meant by comparing the kingdom to a mustard seed and yeast. Well, what happens when you plant a mustard seed? It will eventually grow into a tree that stands about twenty feet tall, and just as wide. And what happens when you add yeast to a dough. Again, in time, it causes it to expand. And so both refer to something small that eventually grows big. Perhaps that suggests that when we as individuals, and as a congregation, are obedient to the will of God, we become a starting point where God’s will can spread wider to more people.

So how do we come to know God’s will? As Jesus says, “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness”. We seek his will through the study of scripture and through prayer to begin with. In Romans 14:17, the apostle Paul writes, “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” And, so, seeking his will also includes being open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. This is akin to Jesus’ statement in the third chapter of John - “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Again, this suggests, that our perception of the kingdom comes through divine guidance.

Note, as well, the repetition of the word righteousness, which can be seen as goodness, and in the Bible is often synonymous with the word justice. Our ability to see the kingdom of God has to do with our ability to understand the nature of what God perceives as righteous and just, and places on us the responsibility of striving towards its reality - that when we are faithful the kingdom of God expands and grows. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, ever loving and kind, we thank you this day you have given us. May we please you in all that we say and do. Lead us, Lord, that we may be the people you would have us be, seeking to do your will as best we understand it. Your Son Jesus came to us preaching your kingdom, which is near, yet still unfulfilled. Show us the way, so that we may move in the direction of that fulfillment. Teach us the ways of true love, of mercy and compassion. Help us to be forgiving of those who may have hurt us. Grant us the faith we need to meet the challenges of today, and to look to the future with vision and hope. Amen.