

KINGDOM TREASURES

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

On Tuesday of this week, the state highway patrol office in Tacoma, Washington, began getting phone calls reporting a truck—an 18-wheeler—driving on the interstate oozing out great blobs of an unknown substance. These blobs were falling out onto the roadway. Some people reported that it was dropping insulation; others said it was some sort of foam. The highway patrol reacted and located the truck. By this time, the truck driver had already pulled over sensing that something was wrong. Upon investigating, it was discovered that what had been falling onto the road was dough—bread dough.

What had happened was that the driver had made his normal pick-up, as he had done for years, transporting dough trimmings from a biscuit factory. These scraps were placed in plastic bags and then loaded into a container to be hauled to a plant to be processed into animal feed. The driver picked up his normal load and started the trip. But Tuesday was different. It was hot. And there was traffic. And the drive took longer than normal. And in the heat, the dough did what dough does—it started to rise. And it filled the container and oozed over the sides of the container and out onto the highway.

The good news is that no one was hurt. There were no accidents. The dough got scraped up off the asphalt. The driver of the truck was deeply embarrassed about the whole incident. And the highway patrol issued a funny video making light of the sticky situation.

I tell this story because our reading today involves dough. Today, we are looking at four parables from Matthew's gospel that describe the kingdom of heaven. Did Jesus tell these parables back-to-back, all four and a row as Matthew presents them? Probably not. Did Matthew collect these words of Jesus about the kingdom and place them together for his readers? That is more likely. I have no doubt that these parables were created in response to the question, "What is the kingdom of heaven like?" Jesus had been preaching about the kingdom of heaven; Matthew had been teaching his congregation about the kingdom of heaven. In response to the peoples' question, we have these parables.

Today, we have this cultural image of heaven baked into our brains. Just say the word 'heaven' and we think of that place 'up there'; the place that is the afterlife reward for the godly. Heaven is a place of eternal bliss. For the less-than-godly there is that other place.

For Jesus, heaven is something different. Heaven is not just the afterlife, it is also the now. The kingdom of heaven is present but not fully realized. The kingdom

is among us but hidden. The kingdom of heaven exists as the ‘already, but not yet.’ The kingdom represents God's presence among us, our being in relationship with God, our giving ourselves wholly in worship and devotion to God. That is the kingdom of heaven. To describe what is essentially indescribable, Jesus used parables—short stories. You will recall that these parables are intended to be ‘cast alongside’ the kingdom to further illuminate the kingdom for us.

In the first parable in our reading, heaven is like a mustard seed. The mustard seed is incredibly tiny, yet grows into a very large bush. The mustard bush is not technically a tree since it does not have a single trunk. The mustard bush can easily grow 10-15 feet tall. In reality, it is a weed. A farmer would not want this plant in his field where it could grow and scatter its seeds enabling more plants to take hold. And yet, in this field, one tiny seed is placed. And once placed there it would be impossible to find until it started growing. The ridiculously small mustard seed can take over a well-tilled field. The kingdom is like a mustard seed.

The second parable is the one about dough. A woman has three measures of flour and into this she places yeast. It sounds as if she is making bread. But is she? Three measures of flour is approximately 50 to 60 pounds of flour. That's a lot of bread. For some reason, the English translation tells us that she *mixes* the yeast into the flour. That is not accurate. The original Greek says that the woman *hid* the yeast in the flour, not mixed. She purposely contaminates 60 pounds of flour until all of it was leavened and changed. The kingdom is like yeast.

The third parable tells of a treasure which was hidden in a field. This time, a person discovers it, re-hides the treasure, then in great joy goes and sells everything he has in order to purchase that field. The kingdom is like a hidden treasure.

The fourth parable is about another person—a merchant—who deals in fine pearls. When he discovers one particularly valuable pearl, he sells all that he has in order to acquire that one pearl. The kingdom is like pearl.

These four parables about the kingdom—do they tell us what the kingdom looks like? that its streets are paved with gold? that it is populated with harp-playing angels? that it is a place where you can eat spare ribs and chocolate cake all the time? No. These four parables tell us that the kingdom of heaven is something that will disrupt our well-organized lives. In the perfectly manicured farmer's field the kingdom is a tiny seed that will eventually conquer the land. It is like yeast that will transform flour. There's something sneaky and insidious about the kingdom. It starts small; most people won't notice it. But it grows and spreads. It is like kudzu.

The kingdom can be like the seed or the yeast that is quietly concealed until it grows and spreads. Or it can be something wonderful that is discovered and when discovered inspires those who find it to radically change their lives. Later in

Matthew's gospel, Jesus will tell his disciples that faith, even the size of a mustard seed, can move mountains.

The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. Once discovered, the finder sells all he has to purchase that field and that treasure.

Or the kingdom is like a merchant who sells everything to buy one particularly valuable pearl. In each of these cases, the finder sells everything to make thier acquisition. For the finder of the treasure, the discovery was an unexpected surprise. For the merchant, a man who deals in valuable pearls, finding this one exceptional pearl was a lifetime achievement. This was a pearl that he simply had to have. To afford it, he needed to sell all he had which was likely a collection of fine pearls. He sold many good things to get the one great thing. The kingdom is like that, it is worth selling all we have—even those things we value most—to obtain it.

When we consider the kingdom, we see it as something external, something outside of us. The kingdom is something we are searching for, striving for, something we can taste on the tip of our tongue, something we can sense but not quite feel, something we can see when we shut our eyes.

But how many of us look inwardly for the kingdom? Have you considered that the kingdom is within you. That you are 60 pounds of flour and the kingdom is a small bit of yeast slowly changing you from unleavened to leavened. Or you are a field and the kingdom is a tiny seed taking root? When you discover that kingdom within you will you do what is necessary to make it yours? Will you gladly give up your old life to embrace the new?

Also, in these parables, the kingdom does not appear passively. Action is required. No parable tells of a person who sits idly by ignoring the world and then experiences the kingdom. These four parables are driven by action. The farmer sowed the seed; the woman hid the yeast; the men found and hid, and sold and bought. To realize the kingdom requires that we must act.

These parables are wonderful. They stretch our imaginations and challenge our faith. But they are not the only way to describe the kingdom. As people of faith we should practice looking for the kingdom, searching for it in the unlikely places around us. As we search we will begin to see the kingdom in new and different ways.

This past week, here at the church, we spent some time trying to help a young, homeless man. He had gotten to Lebanon with no money or transportation, no job, no place to stay. We first discovered his backpack in the bushes next to the church. On Monday, we found him sleeping at the back door. I finally met him and found him to be very gentle, very polite, but clearly having issues that makes it difficult for him to easily function day-to-day as we do—to maintain our lives. By the end of

the week he had two jobs and a bicycle and a place to stay if he wanted it. As I took him around seeking assistance I was reminded of how many people here in Lebanon have given themselves to helping others. Over and over I witnessed God's kingdom. I saw it in the woman who collects and distributes bicycles, in the house that just opened that will proved shelter to eight homeless veterans, in the business that freely gives to local helping organizations supporting their work, in the business that hires people who have been incarcerated just to give them a chance. These are a few signs of the kingdom. There are many more. We only need practice looking in order to see them. And every one of them—very glimpse of the kingdom—is a mustard seed, which, if given the chance, will transform us all.