

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 12, Series A (Pentecost 8)
Saturday, July 29th, 2017
Sunday, July 30th, 2017

Sermon: Small Beginnings

Text: Matthew 13:31-33

Focus: Big things come from small beginnings.

Function: That they would not be discouraged by the Church's diminishing cultural influence.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity" (SC, 2nd Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Visual: Mustard seed and yeast packet

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. The Word of God that engages us today is from Matthew 13:

"[Jesus] put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened'" (Matt. 13:31-33, ESV).¹

The verses I just read are not part of today's Gospel reading, although they should have been.

They are included in the Revised Common Lectionary used by the Roman Catholic Church and most other Protestant churches. Yet somehow, they were left out of our church's lectionary.²

(Aside: Perhaps the LCMS is gluten intolerant and didn't appreciate a parable about yeast and wheat!) Small things like mustard seed and yeast have a way of slipping through the cracks and going unnoticed. But big things often come from small beginnings, and that is the point of these two parables of Jesus.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

² Both the one-year and three-year LCMS lectionaries omit these verses, which is unfortunate, especially since the Lucan parallel for verse 33 never turns up (Luke 13:20-21).

I brought some mustard seed and yeast with me this morning. [*Hold them up.*] As you can see, there really isn't much *to see*. They're tiny. Proverbially, mustard seed was the smallest seed in the garden. Yet any botanist can tell you that, strictly speaking, that statement is biologically untrue. There are plenty of smaller seeds scattered across God's green earth. But mustard seed surely illustrates the point that big things come from small beginnings. For from this little seed, a garden shrub as tall as ten feet high can grow, dwarfing the smaller shrubs and bushes beneath it. That is the picture of Jesus' first parable.

The second parable is about a woman who "hid" leaven, or yeast, in three measures of flour until the whole batch was leavened. The measures were seahs or satons, about 13 liters each. I know that some of you really like to bake, but I highly doubt that any of you have baked as much dough as I have (the one exception being Debi Poucher, who was a baker's daughter). I grew up working in the kitchen of my parents' pizzeria on the south side of Milwaukee. From the age of 12 until 20, I slaved away in the pizza kitchen, mixing dough, rolling dough, topping pizzas, and baking them—as well as operating the grill and fryer, answering phones, waiting on tables, and—after I got my driver's license—delivering pizzas. But I digress!

The point of all this was to let you know that I know a lot about dough. Running a pizza restaurant, we used to mix dough in large batches. We used to mix about 2 tablespoons of yeast into a large, 25-pound bag of flour along with water and a few secret ingredients in order to make a batch of dough. After it was done mixing, we'd put it into a ten-gallon bucket, which is about how much dough the woman in Jesus' story made too. And let me tell you, that's a lot of dough! That little bit of yeast was enough to make the crusts rise on a few dozen pizzas. Over the course of the night, we had to punch down the dough several times as it doubled and tripled in size; otherwise, it would have overflowed the bucket. Truly amazing!

And Jesus tells us that is what the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God, is like: a tiny mustard seed you can hardly see that flowers into a towering tree, or even a bit of yeast hidden in a huge amount of flour that leavens all of the dough. Remember that the kingdom of God is the gracious rule and reign of God, God's activity—God doing God's thing here on earth, as it is done in heaven.

God's work in the world is often hard to see, especially in a world full of violence and wickedness. We are rightly horrified by the moral chaos of post-modern America that is tearing apart families and dividing communities and churches. God hates sin. (Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that God hates *our* sins too, not just the sins of other people). The moral foundations of our society are shaken (disappearing?), and the Church no longer enjoys a place of privileged position in public discourse. America is much like Israel during the time of the Judges, when “there was no king in Israel” and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). We look at our broken society and faltering church attendance and wonder why God allows the wicked to prosper.

The parables of Jesus give us hope and urge patience. They remind us that big things come from small beginnings. The kingdom of God began with just Jesus—an army of one—which grew to four disciples, then twelve, then the 120 gathered on the Day of Pentecost. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church began to grow by the hundreds and thousands. Despite persecution by the Jewish religious leaders and Roman authorities, Christianity grew even in the midst of persecution. As Tertullian famously quipped, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church!” Not until the Edict of Milan in 317 A.D., when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity did the Church become the biggest influencer of culture until the Enlightenment movement took over nearly 1,500 years later.

Since then the western Church has grown more liberal. There has been a great apostasy, or falling away, in Europe and North America. Yet the Church continues to grow exponentially in Africa and Asia. A little leaven leavens the whole lump, and nothing can stop the spread of God's kingdom.

Everywhere you look, we can see the evidence of God's hand working in the world. Hospitals and universities are the legacy of Christianity. Many hospitals still bear the names of Christian saints or church denominations, such as Lutheran Hospital in Lakewood or St. Joseph Hospital in Denver, because they were founded in imitation of the healing ministry of the merciful Lord Jesus. Over the centuries, the Church founded thousands of schools and universities because it was necessary to have educated clergy and laity to read and teach the Holy Scriptures. The words of Jesus and the apostles pepper our speech in the form of proverbs and maxims. Most of the great works of literature, music, and the arts are inspired by the Christian story. And wherever Christianity has gone in the world, it has elevated the status of women, children, orphans, the poor, and the outcaste. As Jesus says, "Whatever you do for the least of these, my brothers, you do unto me" (Matt. 25:40). Even the founding principles of democracy are based on the idea of our spiritual freedom in Christ. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

Truly, the world is a better place because of Christ and his kingdom, operating through the mission and ministry of the Christian Church. And even if the Church suffers persecution in this day and age, no matter how many times people try to punch down the dough, that little bit of yeast keeps rising, and the Church continues to grow.

Yet the most amazing evidence of God's work in the world is the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. The same Jesus who told so many stories

about seeds also compared his own life to a seed: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Jesus’ body died on the cross for our sins and was buried in the ground like a fallen seed. But the dust of death could not destroy the power of God’s love, and Jesus rose victoriously on the third day to give eternal life to all who believe in his name—the abundant fruit of Jesus’ resurrection.

The parables of Jesus prove that God is at work in the world, even when his hand is hard to see. Like a tiny mustard seed or a little bit of yeast, God’s kingdom starts small but grows and grows. Big things come from small beginnings. The parables of Jesus also demonstrate that God works through simple, ordinary people and things. The reign of heaven is like a farmer who went out to sow, like a mustard seed, like a woman baking bread, like a man who stumbles upon treasure, or a merchant looking for costly pearls, or a net full of fish. “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21), within you, and among you in the ordinary and everyday parts of your life. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the kingdom of heaven is “all mixed in with the humdrum and ho-hum of our days..., in all the ordinary people and places and activities of our lives....”³

God still works through small, simple, ordinary things to accomplish his mighty will in our lives today. Through the Word and Sacraments, his so-called “means of grace,” he forgives our sins and gives us eternal life in the stories of ordinary men, women, and children written in pen and ink, through the water of Holy Baptism, and through the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. God takes what is small, simple, and despised in the world and transforms it into the Word of God, the fountain of youth, and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. All it takes is the

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Seeds of Heaven,” in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 44.

faith of a mustard seed to believe and receive the benefits of God's kingdom (cf. Matt. 17:20).

Yet a tiny mustard seed can grow into an enormous plant with perches aplenty for all the birds of heaven. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear (Matt. 13:9, 43)! In the name of Jesus. Amen.