

Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 2017 - "The Scandalous Kingdom"

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 30, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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The Scandalous Kingdom

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The kingdom of heaven is like a small mustard seed planted in a garden that grew into a huge tree. So, this parable means we should experience amazing growth in our lives and in the church, right? We can expect to keep growing bigger, better, stronger and maybe even richer. Wait, that's the American rags-to-riches story; but sometimes it influences how we read the Bible.

The parable about the woman making bread is often understood the same way. A little yeast can make a big difference, so expect great things.

The notes in my study Bible describe these as "parables of tremendous growth." That's certainly a valid way to interpret them. Later in Matthew we're told that even faith as small as a mustard seed can accomplish great things.

But there's more going on here than tremendous growth. Jesus' words would have totally shocked his audience. He likens the kingdom of heaven to things they believed to be unclean and wrong.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden." The thing is, Jewish law specifically forbids sowing mustard seeds in gardens. Gardens are meant for vegetables, so putting a mustard seed in one violates the Holiness Codes about keeping diverse things separate. Planting a mustard seed in a garden would be like selling McDonald's French Fries at the farmer's market or maybe bratwurst at Nordic Fest, but much more serious and shocking. The ancient Holiness Codes kept the people safe and gave them their identity.

So, Jesus isn't just talking about big growth from a small seed. He's talking about growth from a seed that should not have been where it was planted. The sowing and the growth that resulted are scandals - illegitimate, tainted, unclean.

The parable about the woman baking bread is even worse. Our translation reads, "the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." That sounds nice, but the real meaning is lost in translation.

For one thing, in the Greek Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, not yeast. Jesus isn't talking about nicely packaged, controlled yeast that we use now. He's talking about leaven that was made by taking a piece of bread and setting it in a damp, dark place until mold formed - like a sourdough starter. The rotten bread was then mixed into flour to make leavened bread. Leaven was viewed as something that corrupted; it was a metaphor for sin and its capacity to infect.

Leavening produced larger loaves that fed a family longer; but it was viewed as unholy for the everyday. Unleavened bread was for the holy, the sacred, feasts. This woman was making enough bread for a feast. She had three measures of flour- equal to 144 cups today. So, she ruined a lot of good flour by adding leaven to it. Also, the Greek here doesn't say that the woman mixed in the leaven; it says that she hid it. Besides, in the Holiness Codes, women were associated with uncleanness and impurity.

So, Jesus is saying the kingdom of God is like an unclean woman, hiding the corrupting leaven in order to infect a huge amount of flour.

There's more going on here than growth.

Jesus associates God's coming kingdom with uncleanness just as Jesus associated with people who were considered unclean. It seems Jesus is trying to mess with ideas of what is sacred and good. Things that appear profane and unclean may actually help to bring about God's kingdom.

So, when we're frightened, when we're repelled, when we're certain something is wrong, we should pay close attention. Maybe it's precisely then that God's kingdom is at work in our lives.

When we're certain that we are right and good and true, when we want to follow our own rules about keeping diverse things separate, then we may just need God to sow a mustard seed in our garden or hide some leaven that will change us.

After Jesus describes the scandal of the mustard seed's planting, he goes on to tell how this seed grew into a tree and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. Hearing this would have reminded Jesus' first audience of an Old Testament vision in which God promises a tree where all birds will nest, all nations will be sheltered, and all people will find fruit enough to be fed. Jesus implies that the tree for the healing of the nations will come from a seemingly unclean, tainted, improperly planted mustard seed. And, the bread that the woman made, while seemingly corrupt, unholy, and ordinary, could feed many, many people.

So, that which seems to us wrong or corrupt could be the very thing God is using to shelter, to feed, to bring in the kingdom. We can't know for sure as the last parable we heard today reminds us; it's not up to us to judge what's good or bad. Maybe something really is corrupt, but maybe God is still at work through it to bring good.

These parables invite us to be open to the transformation that can come from the mixing of diverse kinds - including the mixing of people with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Such mixing can feel threatening at first, yet it can help us to grow as people and as a community. Can we be open to things and people we find repulsive, threatening, or just plain wrong? Can we see God at work even through them?

These parables encourage not to focus on purity and separation but on growth that brings shelter and feeds people. They push us past our rigid categories and remind us to look for God everywhere, in everything.

God grant that we be open to this kind of tremendous growth.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.