

“The Kingdom of God”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Matthew 13:31-33, 42-55

When I was a kid I usually thought that bigger was better. Especially with regards to sweets. If a small piece of cake tasted good, a bigger piece of cake was even better. I reached for the bigger cookie, the bigger brownie, the bigger candy bar. When my brother and I had to share something like a cookie, my mom had one of us break it in half while the other one got to choose the portion. That kept the sibling doing the breaking honest and meant that the other would stare at the two halves, trying to determine which was the bigger piece before choosing.

And, of course, we knew that the bigger the present, the better it would be. We would see the largest box in the pile, and we knew that something extraordinarily good must be hidden inside. It was only as we grew bigger that we learned that the best things don't always come in the biggest boxes. Checks, rings, car keys all come in pretty small packages.

In my family at Christmas, the best gifts were always saved until last. My mom would hide something in an envelope or ornament and hang it on the tree. You didn't even realize it was there until everything had been opened and then she would say, go look at the tree and see if you see anything else. It might be a check or tickets to a play or sporting event downtown. It might be a clue that you had to follow to a gift hidden in the house or garage.

Or it might be a miniature version or picture of a larger gift – like the time my mom wrapped a tiny grill from my dollhouse and gave it to my grandparents to represent the real grill they would be getting. Some very good things came in those little packages.

Still, it's a hard lesson to learn. As adults, many of us get tricked into the idea that bigger *is* better. Bigger cars, bigger houses, more money, more things, more status, more power. And those of us who don't have the means to acquire all of that *more* can be seduced into thinking that because we don't have all the bigger and better stuff or influence, we can't make a difference. We think we're too small. It suits the principalities and powers of this world for us to keep thinking that way. Either we spend our time trying to acquire all the status, stuff, and power the world tells us we need, or we stay small, convinced that we don't have enough status, stuff, or power to change things.

But there is another way.

The choice doesn't have to be between this world power or staying small.

There's also the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed. When you plant it, it germinates quickly, growing large enough not only to shelter birds but also to take over a whole field. The mustard plant of Jesus' time was not unlike our kudzu today, more useful because of its medicinal value, but still, an invasive plant that spread uncontrollably.

The kingdom of God starts small and grows big. *And* it is not under our control.

Jesus also says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. You want to talk about small. *We* think of yeast as a good thing because it makes bread rise, but back in Jesus' day, it was *unleavened* bread that was important. Yeast was considered impure. It corrupted the bread.

And yet Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is *like* the yeast that the woman mixed with an abundance of flour – three measures would have been like 50 pounds of flour. Yeast, tiny hidden yeast, makes the dough rise and grow. Yeast infiltrates the whole loaf of bread, getting everywhere with its impure, expanding self. That's what God's kingdom is like.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great value – someone is willing to give up everything they own in order to buy it. A very good thing in a small package. So valuable it's worth giving up everything else in order to have it.

Small, hidden, invasive, uncontrollable, of great value.

My favorite commentator, David Lose, says, “the Gospel of the kingdom that Jesus proclaims and lives is truly good news only to those who are not finally satisfied with what this life has to offer. Which is perhaps why the church has always grown most quickly in those places where life is most fragile, if not threatened. When you can set yourself up with the comforts of the world and fortify the illusion that you are master of the universe, of what value are Jesus' promises?”¹

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-8-a-parabolic-promises/>

Three years ago, I preached on this passage at the SpiritWorks First Fridays recovery Eucharist. The recovery community is a place where life is fragile and often threatened. In order to be in recovery, we have to give up the illusion that we're masters of the universe, and we come to understand that we are powerless over substances, behaviors, and other people. When we surrender our wills and lives to the care of God, we become a place for the seeds of God's kingdom to take root and then expand and grow with abandon. As we trade what this world considers valuable for the priceless seeds and yeast and treasures and pearls of the kingdom of God, we get to be part of the wild, abundant spreading of God's tenacious love and compassion and justice and hope.

The church has things to learn from the recovery community. Especially the church in predominantly white, affluent areas of this country. It can be very difficult to hear the message of seeds and yeast when we're set up with the comforts of this world. We don't always recognize our need for God when we believe we are responsible for our own success.

Nine years ago, when I first started attending recovery meetings, I met people who understood their dependence on God in a way I had rarely seen. People who prayed like their lives depended on it, because they did. People in recovery recognize their vulnerability and brokenness. They share honestly and openly about their struggles and their loved ones' struggles. Frequently they weep for their losses and the part they played in them. They do the hard work of examining how they've contributed to their own suffering and the suffering of others. And in the process of doing that hard work, they find the treasure hidden in the field, and they give everything in order to keep it.

Those of us with a sense of our own importance, our certainty of being right, our clarity about how we have earned and deserve the good things in our lives, might not recognize the priceless pearl when we see it. We might not be willing to give up what we have to obtain that which is more important.

We might not understand that it is through our smallness, our impurity, our hiddenness, that God is able to work. When we're feeling fragile and vulnerable and broken and grieving and lost, we have room for God to move in us, because we know we can't do it by ourselves. And when we've moved through our difficult and broken times, then we become channels of God's love and hope, sharing the good news of redemption and recovery with others.

My friends, don't be seduced by the bigger and better that the world may tell you is important. Jesus came into the world as an infant, not a mighty king. The kingdom of heaven may come in a small package, but it is the best thing of all. It is here, now, growing in each one of us, in the word we have heard, and in the bread we will break. It is here, now. In this time where everything seems hard, look around. Though it may seem hidden, the kingdom of heaven is near. As close as our breath. Nothing can separate us from it.