

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, July 23rd & 24th, 2011
TEXT: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
OCCASION: Return of Haiti Mission Team
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Roughly eighteen months ago, a massive earthquake struck the nation of Haiti. In a nation of about 8 million people, 200,000 persons were killed and a million were left without homes. Translate that to the scale of the United States, and that would be about 7 million people losing their lives in only a few days and forty million people left with no place to live. It would take some time to recover from such devastation. It takes much longer when you have so few resources. It is impossible to miss the evidence of the destruction Haiti experienced back in January of last year.

Now we started going to Haiti before the earthquake. Made our first trip in June of 2009, and served in an orphanage. And then we made a decision that we didn't want just to serve, but wanted to be in relationship. So the second trip...in May of 2010...was a trip in which we served, but also sought out friends with whom we could work together for a while. That happened; and so Pere Val and his wife Carmel came to visit us in April. And then, a week before last, ten of us visited them and the people they serve.

You'll hear us say this a lot for a while, but thank you; thank you for the prayers, and the support, and the encouragement...for the Haiti Team, for making possible CARITAS, and the Senior High Mission, and 300 kids at Vacation Bible School, and the Middle School Mission, and the Peter-Paul Camp, and early on, the journey to Sudan. These are ministries of relationship and service that we all do together, in different ways. And so not for the first time, and not for the last, our thanks to one another...today, especially from the Haiti Team.

So there were ten of us in Haiti; and last Sunday, while you were worshiping here, we were worshiping there. Actually, we worshiped twice last Sunday morning.

One of the churches Pere Val pastors is the Church of Saint Simeon, the place where we stayed...slept in tents, under an awning.

Worship starts around 7:30 at Saint Simeon; which sounds early for us, but which for where we were staying is actually more like mid-morning. It's a comparatively large congregation...about 120-150 people were present for worship. The sanctuary, itself, is kind of like this one in style...elegantly simple. The congregation is over fifty years old, and has an established heritage. More than one person at worship was there because they were back from the US to visit family. In other words, it's rich enough in its history that it's a place people come back to.

Worship finished about 8:45, and then after hanging around for a little bit and talking with people as best we could considering the language difference, the ten of us piled into a couple of trucks with Pere Val and a few others and made our way to our second worship service of the morning...at a church called Saint Marc, in a place called Lilevois...about twenty minutes from Saint Simeon.

Now, I want to say something about this trip that's pretty important...this was not just a mission trip. It was built upon the work done by the two previous Haiti teams have done to create a relationship; a partnership, really. We have intentionally sought a people to work

with...that's why we asked Pere Val and Carmel to visit a few months ago. And the people with whom we are partnering are the people of Saint Marc.

In square footage, the sanctuary at Saint Marc is about the size of a large master bedroom. It's not, in all actuality, a dedicated worship space at all. There's an elementary school at Saint Marc, and so they worship in a school room. They don't have a church building. So isn't it fitting for a church that began in an elementary school to be partnering with a church that worships in an elementary school? God is amazingly good!

Now we had been at Saint Marc throughout the week. Three of us had been there a lot, helping with some construction work because they're building a security fence that we are helping to make possible. We moved some rocks, and carried some cement, and dug some holes. Other than the trucks that hauled in materials, there wasn't a single power-driven tool used to do the work. That's kind of how it works there.

But there were two doctors and a nurse and an EMT worker on the trip, so we had also done a medical clinic there one day; and I think they saw over 100 people that day...mostly children. In fact, we did four medical clinics over the week, and what we discovered is that a vital element in any clinic is playtime. Because lots of kids gather, and kids like to play. So at Saint Marc and all the clinics we did, while we were seeing patients we talked with the adults as best we could; and we played with kids a lot...kicking things around, and throwing Frisbees, and doing magic tricks, and lots of baby holding. Just things you do when you're around kids...especially kids who don't have video games, or Netflix, or soccer practice, or diapers.

On Saturday...the day before worship...we were present for a graduation ceremony at the school. There were probably 200 people there. The kids sang and danced and got awards, and parents beamed the same way we beam at our children's school programs. And then, with our friends at the school, we served lunch.

And I'm telling you about all that because it meant that when we went to worship at Saint Marc last Sunday morning, we were worshipping with people who knew us, and whom we knew. Friendships had happened. In that small congregation was Delva, the site manager for the construction of the security fence; and Violetta, the teacher who directed the party on Saturday; and the elderly woman who had given the land for Saint Marc so that a school and church could be established, and the Kingdom of heaven gain another foothold; and children who may have been treated in the clinic for ailments completely alien to our children, and with whom we had played during the week.

It is a hopeful and faithful community, one that loves well and smiles easily. As it is in Sudan, what we consider necessities to them are luxuries. Life's not easy...but there is celebration and rejoicing and gratitude over what God is doing, beginning with another day of life.

By the time we worshiped with Saint Marc, the heat of the day had begun; and the air wasn't moving much. There were thirty-five people from the community at worship that morning; plus three worship leaders; plus the ten of us...a smaller group—smaller than Christ Church; smaller than Saint Simeon; probably smaller than the group to which Paul wrote this letter we read from this evening. But we sang, and prayed, and shared in the Lord's Supper just like we do here except in Creole; and celebrated because among so little with needs so great, God was making something mighty happen.

Which shouldn't surprise us, because the kingdom of heaven is like a seed that grows into a bush so big it's actually a tree; or it's like a bit of yeast thrown into a pile of dough that makes enough bread to feed a hundred people.

Every seed is small, but it was proverbial that the mustard seed is the smallest. It would be ridiculous to sow mustard in your field because as much as anything else, mustard is a weed; and a pungent weed, at that. It's a plant that grows fast, and takes over where it's planted because its own seeds germinate quickly. Once mustard is in the field, it's hard to get it out. What comes from the mustard seed is a kind of uncontrollable growth that swallows up everything in its path.

There's always an element of shock in Jesus' parables. The shock effect is one of the things that makes them parables. There's craziness in the mustard seed parable about the craziness of God; that the Kingdom is this thing so small as to be almost invisible; but still, it grows and eventually takes over. It's shocking because no one would intentionally sow mustard into a field. You can't stop it once it's there. But that's what happens here. The sower sows it on purpose...and I like to think that maybe that's because mustard, along with being stinky and uncontrollable, had medicinal purposes. It could ease the pain of bites and stings; people chewed it for relief of toothaches; and if your head is stuffed up...well, it'll make you sneeze and clear you out. What's the kingdom of God like? Like a smelly weed whose growth can't be stopped, and that brings healing...all from the tiniest beginning.

Or, it's like yeast that a woman mixes into a batch of dough. This isn't a packet of Fleischmann's Jesus is talking about. When Jesus said "yeast," people would have thought moldy, rotten bread. That's how yeast or leaven begins. And it wasn't to the Jewish people a good thing. To the Hebrews, leaven represented impurity. But listen up to some Bible...

Our translation says that the woman mixes in the leaven; that she kneads it in. But the word Jesus uses here is "egkrypto," which means to hide. She's not mixing it into the dough. She's hiding it in the dough. More than that, the word "egkrypto" implies that the hiding is done for selfish reasons...to keep it all for one's self; that she doesn't want anybody else to know it's there. Keeping it secret.

So she puts it in the oven, hoping that nobody's going to figure out her secret...and it makes fifty pounds of bread! That's how much bread three measures would make. It's bursting through the oven doors, it's so much bread. This woman's got her back to the oven door trying to keep this bread back; but do what she might, ain't no way she's hiding the leaven in that loaf.

What's the kingdom of God like? It's like trying to hide yeast in some dough. You can try to hide it...it may even be invisible for a while; may be hard to see against what surrounds it...but eventually it's going to make everything around it burst forth abundantly.

You see, the Kingdom keeps coming, and God will prevail. Look around, of course, and we're not always so sure. It may not always look as if God will prevail. In places like Haiti and Sudan...and in places like Richmond...it doesn't always look that way. There will be moments...and we all have our moments...when we look around or look at our own lives and it seems anything but the Kingdom of God. But it will prevail. It will not be stopped...either by the powers of evil, or sloth, or fear, or darkness, or indifference. That's what this whole net thing is about...not so much that the evil will be separated out from the good; but that God is the one who is in charge and who will, in the end, make it right. Be deceived not by appearances.

Sometimes Jesus speaks directly. But when it comes to the kingdom of God, he speaks in stories and images. He doesn't say what it is; he says what it's like. He doesn't give a definition. He paints pictures and tells stories. Because as a friend of mine pointed out, if you look at the sun you'll be blinded. But you can look at, and experience, the sun's effects. He tells parables so that maybe we may look around, and see the kingdom present now; and in the cases

of these two parables, that it may start small...but it's present, and busy, sometimes in ways that are hidden.

But if we open our eyes and hands and hearts, and pay attention, it can be found...

But not without cost.

It's a little bit like this...It's like renting someone's beach house, digging around in the backyard, finding a buried treasure worth millions, re-burying the treasure, not telling the landlord about it, and selling everything you have to buy the home. Sounds a bit sketchy, which is part of the shock of the whole thing. But sometimes, there's something worth so much that we just got to do whatever we need to get it. In fact, sometimes there are things that can only be received when we're willing to give everything over to receiving them.

Or it's like this...It's like finding a gem so valuable that the only way to acquire it is to sell everything you have to get it. The kicker being that, of course, the possession of the gem leaves you "cash poor." You can have the pearl of great price, or you can have your other assets, but you can't have both.

Or it's like this...and I've told this story before, but it's so good, it's worth telling again...a woman traveled overseas, and at an art auction found a painting she just absolutely needed to have. So she sends a text to her husband back home, and lets him know what she thinks it's going to cost. He texts her back saying "No. Price too high." She texts him back later about how much he'll love the painting in their living room, and she can't wait to show it to him. So he asks her if she got his text, and she replies "Yes. You said no price too high, so I spent it all..."

That's our response to a kingdom that's like out-of-control mustard seed, and the abundant bread of life. No price too high.

We'll go back to Haiti. We'll go back to Haiti because there's kingdom work going on there. We'll go back because we have something to share with our friends, and they have something to share with us; because we help reveal the kingdom to one another. We'll go back because Saint Marc is mustard seed small, and because God has placed a lot of leaven in that loaf. And we'll go back to Sudan; and our youth will make their summer mission journeys again; and there will be camps on this property; and before you know it, we'll be sitting at table and worshipping with our CARITAS guests again; and we'll minister to one another, be present to one another, because you don't have to go far away to find the presence of the Kingdom of God. You can find it in the person sitting next to us tonight; and as Jesus says in Luke, it's actually already inside us.

Again, on behalf of the Haiti Team, thank you.