

Message Delivered at Christ Church

March 5th & 6th, 2011

Luke 13:10-35

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Let's do some Bible today, everybody...

We are now on week fourteen of the Big Read. We're studying Luke together. And we're doing this project together...reading and studying together...because of who we are. We are God's covenantal people. It's a relationship we're in with the Lord; and God gives more grace, and mercy, and love than we can imagine...Love that is just an "is," no matter what...and then, through the Spirit, we respond to those gifts. That's how covenantal relationship works. And we're doing this project to be shoulder-deep in the Gospel to imagine how Jesus is calling us deeper, and into more; how to respond to God's grace; live thankfully, as we've been proclaiming these few weeks. We have things before us as a people; we have things before us individually. And the place to begin to discern our response is to dwell in the scriptures, and in the Gospel, and in Jesus. That's why we're doing this.

Today, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. It's important to know that in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is the organizing principle of the story. It's the hook on which Luke hangs his gospel. The journey begins at Luke 9:51, and finishes at Luke 19:58. We're right in the middle of that journey. That's the context for today's story. He's on his way to Jerusalem; moving to the center of Israel and Israel's understanding of their relationship with God. And when you consider that Acts—which Luke also wrote—is the story of the Gospel moving from Jerusalem into the world, everything Luke writes—volume one and volume two—looks kind of like an hourglass; with Jerusalem—to mix a metaphor—as the narrow door through which restoration comes to the world.

Now every story needs a conflict, or else it's not a story. And here in this middle section...though it has been hinted at earlier...the conflict between the Gospel and the world rears its head. And every good story has a crisis point...like a tipping point...the point from which the rest of the story begins to tumble forward and pick up intensity.

What we read today is a crisis point.

This story of the woman being healed in the synagogue is told only in Luke. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus is the guest teacher. A woman who had lived with a malady for eighteen years that had left her bent over comes to worship that day. You see, when we really want to be made whole, nothing will stop us. We will not accept staying outside. Jesus heals her so that she can stand up straight. She does not have to wait to ask for healing, and Jesus says nothing about her faith. He just does it. And she stands up straight.

Now the Senior Pastor doesn't really like all this. It's not how it's supposed to be done. Instead of talking to Jesus, he talks to the crowd. "There are six days you can come for healing. Come then, but not on the Sabbath."

But Jesus will have none of that. So he says to the ruler of the synagogue and those who agree with him, "Y'all will free an ox from its hitching post to give it water on the Sabbath. Shouldn't this daughter of Abraham, who Satan has bound for eighteen years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath?" The parallel is more obvious in the Greek than in the English.

Jesus uses the same word to describe what he has done for her as he does to describe what the leader of the synagogue does for his animals.

The language of freedom here is intentional. Ever have that experience of remembering a rule, but forgetting why it was put in place? Well, in the Old Testament, one of the reasons God established the Sabbath was to celebrate the freedom he had given Israel from its bondage in Egypt. In Egypt, when they were slaves, they had to work all the time. Now, under the kingship of God, they are free. “To remember that freedom,” God tells Israel, “take a day of rest every week.” So what could be a more fitting way to observe the Sabbath than to free someone from their bondage? That’s what Sabbath looks like in the Kingdom. Freedom from bondage...and for some of us, that Good News might be enough for us today.

A couple parables follow this story. Let’s do some heavier lifting here.

We’ve heard these images a lot; they’re pretty popular...we’ve all heard mustard seed, and we’ve all heard yeast in dough. But there are a couple things that matter in how Jesus tells these parables here...

When we hear the story of the yeast in a lump of dough, we get the point pretty easily...yeast is small, but it makes the whole loaf rise. Something small has a big effect. And that’s how we often think of the parable of the mustard seed, as well...you know--the seed is so tiny.

You will notice here, however, that there is no mention of the size of the seed. Because here, that’s not what matters. What matters here is something that’s hard for us to pick up because of the nature of this translation...the word “sow” is too pedestrian a translation of the word Jesus uses. A more accurate rendering would be: “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone threw all over the garden, without caring where it fell.” BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! It’s all over the place! You might find it anywhere! Even in a synagogue in some small, unnamed village.

Now, that’s the first thing about the mustard seed parable...here’s the second: Mustard is a powerful weed with a powerful odor. And where it lands, it takes over. It just keeps going. It can’t really be stopped; and it upsets everything. What’s the Kingdom of God like? It’s like a weed that smells so bad you can’t ignore it, and that will not be stopped; that just keeps taking over, and taking over, and taking over; and the one who sows it is throwing it all over the place.

One parable is about the relentlessness of the Kingdom; that it is broad; and can be found anywhere. The other is about how the Kingdom may start as small as a bit of yeast, but that yeast makes the whole loaf rise. One parable makes the point that even in a synagogue in some small, unnamed village, the Kingdom of God will show up. The other makes the point that no act is too small—certainly not the giving of freedom to a bent over woman—to make a dent in Satan’s power. One parable makes the point that in this community; in the neighborhood; in our kitchens; in our classrooms; in our workplaces...the kingdom of God shows up; and that despite appearances, it is ready to take over. The other makes the point that no act...no kind word, no gift of mercy, no act of patience and love...is too small to not matter. Just consider our own lives...each of us can think of that moment where someone did or said something hardly noticeable that made all the difference. It’s a little like yeast in the loaf.

Okay...so the Kingdom is like mustard seed or yeast. “So how many will be saved,” someone asks Jesus.

Now...have you notice how often Jesus refuses to answer someone’s question? I mean...they ask a question; and Jesus responds; but not to their question. Not for the first time

and not for the last time, he doesn't answer what he's asked. Instead of talking about how many get in, he talks about getting there...through a narrow door.

Now let me tell you about narrow doors...do you remember when we were doing the construction on this space; and we had to close all the main entrance doors; and how all of us came in and out of one door...right over there. Now that's a narrow door.

Now none of us didn't get into the space because the doorway was narrow. Everybody got in. But to get in, we had to pay more attention than we normally do. We had to look for the door. It's not an obvious entrance. Big doors we can stumble through; narrow doors demand our attention. Look too quickly, and one can miss it. We had to follow a new path...literally, a new way. If you went the old way...well, you'd get left outside. This door was narrow; but its narrowness didn't keep anyone out. It just meant that we had to pay attention, and go a new way.

You know, there's a paradox in the Christian life. The kingdom is like a mustard seed. It's sown without reservation; it can't be ignored; and it can't be stopped. It's as likely to be revealed in the smallest acts of mercy as in the most heroic acts of service. But at the same time, like a narrow door, to walk in the Kingdom demands our attention. Because its call is more urgent than we let on.

There is a specific context to the words Jesus speaks here. He's letting Israel know that it's time...the Kingdom is here--new and now. The Kingdom of God is something different than what they had expected. The first are last, and the last are first; the ones we would expect to be there--like Abraham and the prophets—are there. But also there are people we would never expect. The mustard seed is growing, and all sorts of birds will settle in its branches. What we're waiting for has finally come. The train is arriving. So let's get on board.

It's the beginning of Lent this week, and we're going to walk to Jerusalem with Jesus. The end of his words today make clear that that's where he is going. He is going to Jerusalem because we all got to go there. And we're supposed to walk with him. Make no bones about it...Jesus loves Jerusalem; he weeps over it; what he says here is a lament...Oh, that the people would accept his protection, the way chicks accept the protection of their mother. And make no bones about it...the Kingdom is coming...like a mustard seed, like yeast in a lump of dough...and it is big enough for east and west and north and south to find a home in it. Even when difficult words are uttered, Luke just can't seem to resist reminding us of how big the Kingdom is. It is a huge Kingdom with a generous and hospitable King. "So respond to the grace," says Jesus. Live it, and don't wait.

So how shall we respond today? Because today is a good day to respond. I keep looking for a good reason to wait around, but just can't seem to find one. No good reason to wait around.

There's one final thing to point out about what Jesus says in this crisis point. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" I just want to point out one thing...Jerusalem is where he's going. But when he says this here, he's not there yet; he's not in Jerusalem yet. He's still on his way. Earlier in this passage he says "don't be late." But by offering this lament over Jerusalem while still on his way, he may be letting those who listen know that the house ain't full yet; that though the time is now, there is still time...to come back, to receive a wholeness by which we stand up straight, and to welcome the Kingdom of God.

At the end of the Gospel, the risen Lord will say this: "Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations; but begin in Jerusalem." So to Jerusalem he goes. Lent

begins this week, and we'll go with him...not to a place that is an ending, but to a place that is a beginning. Few doorways are narrower than the doorway of a tomb; and usually, those doors stay closed. But here's our hope...through the grace of God, even a door that narrow is one we can walk through; and through the grace of God, even a door that heavy still remains open.