

Mustard Seeds and Yeast

Matthew 13:31-33

Introduction

This Lenten season we are earnestly praying and growing in our understanding of the the second petition of the Lord's Prayer:

THY KINGDOM COME

On these Thursday evenings, our energies take us into the 13th chapter of Matthew's Gospel where we find several stories (or parables) that give us greater insight into how Jesus defines that kingdom. Each of those parables begins with the same phrase:

The Kingdom of heaven is like _____

Put yourself into the mind of a first century Jew, suffering under Roman rule for 100 years.

- If this was a "fill in the blank" test, how would you complete the sentence.
- I don't know about you, but when I think about Kingdoms I think in terms of might and power. Kingdoms come with large armies with lots of tanks and fighter jets. Kingdoms like Rome, Greece, the British Empire.
- I don't think of kingdoms like the European Duchy of Grand Fenwick.
- Never heard of it? It is tiny, just 15 square miles and located in the Alps between Switzerland and France.
- Don't worry. It's fictional.

It appears in a 1955 satirical book by Leonard Wibberley. The book is titled "The Mouse That Roared." When I was in high school our junior class play was stage version of this book. I played the role of Count Rupert Mountjoy.

In order to save itself from bankruptcy, this tiny little kingdom decides to declare war on the United States in the hopes that the US will conquer it and pour all kinds of economic aid into it. That's what our country always does, right?

- Through a series of mishaps, the Duchy of Grand Fenwick actually wins the war, and ends up being the most powerful country in the world.

A fluke. When you see something that small, you don't really expect anything great to result from it. And I believe that is what most Jews then – and Christians today – expect when they think about the Kingdom of Heaven.

So when Matthew 13 begins and we read ...

Such large crowds gathered around (Jesus) that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables ... (Matthew 13:2-3)

We meet a crowd that was made up of Jewish people – religious leaders and regular citizens – who had been taught their entire lives that when the Kingdom of Heaven

came, God's power would vanquish all their foes and restore their nation to world dominance.

- They were expecting something BIG!
- But in our text for today, Jesus instead compares His kingdom to two of the smallest things they could imagine: a mustard seed and a package of yeast.
 - A mustard seed is among the smallest seeds in the world. Perhaps only the orchid seed is smaller.
 - A woman baking bread uses only a small amount of yeast. One-fourth of an ounce makes multiple loaves of bread.

And that is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Very often when the Kingdom of Heaven is at work in our church, in our world and in our individual lives, it seems more like a mustard seed or a bit of yeast.

We expect mighty armies. We experience mustard seeds and yeast.

Jesus Himself was a living example of this.

- He came as a tiny baby.
- On Palm Sunday He entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, without an army and without weapons.

Let me share three insights about a kingdom defined by mustard seeds and yeast.

#1: THE KINGDOM EXPANDS GRADUALLY

Many people struggle throughout their lives, thinking themselves to be spiritual failures because they don't see God doing things overnight. Instant holiness! Wouldn't that be great?

- Some changes do happen instantaneously, but most things happen gradually – almost so gradually you might miss them.
- When you put yeast into a batch of dough, you have to let it sit for a while.
- When you put mustard seeds into the soil, you don't get an instant tree. It takes time.

Let me give you three illustrations:

1. An art museum: You can run through an art museum, but if you do so you miss a lot of the details found in the paintings.
 - When the kingdom of heaven is at work in your life, God moves you slowly down the corridors, causing you to stop and look closely at the various aspects of your lives – so see them for what they are.
 - He shows you the details – if you move slowly enough to pay attention.
 - You learn how that thought, that word, that action, created pain for someone and how it doesn't shine brightly in your life.
 - He affirms some things as positives, others as negatives

2. A cluttered desk: If you were to come into my office tomorrow morning, you would find my desk to be incredibly cluttered with file folders, post-it notes, books and legal pads. It is a conglomeration of all the things I need to do this week – all fanned out before me. It's the way I work.
 - Come see me on Friday afternoon, and the desk is clear.
 - One by one those piles have been addressed.
 - It takes all week. Sometimes longer.

3. The green fog: If you knew the movie "The Ten Commandments" you know how Cecil B. DeMille depicted the death angel moving through Egypt on the night of the Passover. (If you don't know it, that movie will be showing frequently during Lent!)
 - The fog doesn't race, but slowly creeps its way down the street.

When the Kingdom has come to you and is working within you, you aren't likely to see the change, but others will. "There's something different about you" they will say. And it will be true.

- Journaling will help you notice.

INSIGHT #2: THE KINGDOM WORKS SILENTLY

This is a word of encouragement for anyone who has shared their faith story with someone else.

- Have you ever grown frustrated at the lack of progress in the life of the one you have been praying for? You ask God to bring them into the Kingdom, and you can't see anything happening. Remember these words from Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow
 come down from heaven,
 and do not return to it
 without watering the earth
 and making it bud and flourish,
 so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
 It will not return to me empty,
 but will accomplish what I desire
 and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

You can't see yeast at work either. It moves silently, but certainly.

- It can sometimes be so silent, we begin to think God doesn't care. But just because God is silent doesn't mean that he is not working.

The Bible is filled with examples of God's silent working:

- Moses spent 40 years shepherding his father-in-law's sheep in the desert until God had fully prepared him.
- Abraham waited 25 years for his promised son

- The disciples walked with Jesus for 3 years, and then had to wait longer until Pentecost happened.

INSIGHT #3: THE KINGDOM EXPANDS ENTIRELY

Yeast is not restricted to one part of the dough. Mustard seeds will keep growing all the way.

When the kingdom of God is at work in you, it will make you a completely finished product. One my favorite verses in Philippians reads:

... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippian 1:6)

And listen to these words from Ephesians:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)

Filled to fullness. Width, length, height and depth – every dimension filled with the Kingdom.

There will be a day when the whole world will be under the Kingdom of Heaven... when you are entirely His. That's the promise.

APPLICATION

The parables of the mustard seed and yeast challenge how we perceive spiritual growth.

- In a world that values immediate results and large-scale impact, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God often begins in quiet, unnoticed ways.
- The work of God may seem small at first—a single act of kindness, a faithful prayer, a tiny church in an overlooked town—but its effects ripple outward in ways we cannot predict.

These parables also call us to trust in God's unseen work. Just as yeast spreads through dough without human intervention, God's Spirit is constantly at work, transforming lives, families, and communities. The kingdom does not depend on human effort alone; it grows because God sustains it.

What changes has God made in your life? What ones are currently underway?

Our memory verse for this Lenten season:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

Amen.