

“The Hidden, Growing, Fermenting Kingdom”  
Psalm 8:1-4, 9; Romans 8:26-39  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Over the past couple of weeks, we have heard the parables of Jesus. Last week we started one of those parables about the kingdom of heaven. As we begin to think about those parables, I must start with the kingdom of heaven because there are a couple of words we need to think about.

First, in Matthew the author uses this phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” simply to mean the kingdom of God. It shows the respect he gives to God by not saying God’s name. So, the kingdom of heaven we are talking about is God’s kingdom.

The second word that I have to spend some time with is the word “kingdom.” What do you think about when I say the word “kingdom”? It would be interesting to hear our responses. I asked someone I knew, and that person suggested that the first thing that came to mind was Disney’s kingdoms, the kingdoms that show up in all the animated movies they make. The prince and princess, and how somebody gets discovered and gets to be a princess. That’s generally how it seems to go. But on further reflection, it was a recognition that it is about people who are extremely privileged. Somebody gets to be privileged by becoming a princess.

That led me to think about the nature of kings and queens in our world. As I understand it, if you meet Queen Elizabeth, for example, and then you have to leave the room, you are supposed to back out of the room rather than turn your back on the Queen. There is a sense of how important that one monarch is. That was one side of the idea of “kingdom” that struck me: the high status and privilege and power of the monarch and the hierarchy.

Then, I thought about how we call a kingdom a regime because it has an order to it. It has regiments that keep order, maybe using their power to control an area, a people, the way that people can live.

As I thought about kingdoms as being about privilege and power and enforcement of a particular monarch’s will, I heard Jesus’ parables seeming to be so different. Jesus isn’t talking about an individual who comes and rules over everyone else. These first two parables are about things that are small. A mustard seed that, when it goes in the ground, pretty much disappears. Once you put a little dirt over that mustard seed, it is going to be incredibly hard to find that seed again. The same with putting yeast in the flour. It’s almost impossible to go back and try to find that yeast again. It’s not at all about a monarch enforcing their will over other people. It’s about something that seems to engage in the environment and do so in an organic way.

It is incredible to think about. The kingdom is more like yeast that ferments or a seed that germinates and grows almost unexpectedly. We can talk about it today as

microscopic activity. It's not what we see—the powerful using their will to dominate—but these simple things, these organic elements that seem to germinate and ferment and change the context they are in in important ways. It's such a different way of thinking about what the kingdom might mean.

I wonder if there's a way the kingdom, as it engages with us, engages us in caring for one another and something ferments. Something germinates and grows. I think about how when people were settling in the West neighbors helped each other.. Even now, when we have a neighbor who needs help and we realize it, we may jump in and help care for them. I think about the farmers who were busy trying to do their own work, but when one of their neighbors had an accident or got sick, they joined together to help that person out. Indeed, when I was growing up, I spent some time on a ranch in Nebraska. My uncle was a very good rancher. He knew that he needed to make sure to get the hay in before winter, and was pretty task-oriented about getting it done. Yet, when a tornado hit a neighbor's house, all the folks around came and helped clean up and care for those folks. We took a whole day and helped clean up the place as best we could. It is that kind of fermenting, germinating caring that may show the kingdom.

I wonder if something like the protests in Portland could be along those lines. We have people who are going to protest because Oregon has a long history of racism, particularly Portland itself. I read that at one point, the Oregon Territory had a law that they could whip any black person two times a year until they left the territory. In Portland itself, I believe, the color of a person's skin regulated whether they could live in Portland. The protests are about that legacy and wanting to get beyond it, to change it.

Now, I don't know the whole story, but it seems that there are these young people who want to highlight a need for justice by protesting, and there are conflicts that arise. Then there is a set of mothers who have decided that they want to try to protect the young people. And then there's a set of veterans who want to come and try to protect the mothers. There's something that's fermenting and germinating. A sense of caring. I don't know about the whole thing, but I wonder if the kingdom might be in there somehow.

As we think about the kingdom that these first parables talk about, they are hidden. They are things that ferment, that germinate and grow, and we see the change they bring about. I was thinking about the things in my life that are like that, that are so important, but I don't notice. It made me think about nature itself, about the plants around us. How easily I can walk through my life without thinking about those plants, and without thinking about what's going on with them. Yet, those plants are providing the oxygen I need to breathe. Those plants are what take sunlight and turn it into food, a different form of energy that we can use. It's easy to forget about the farmers who manage those plants, that enable us to have food for our table. It's easy to just think it all comes from the grocery store. There are systems, there are activities that are going on that we can so easily forget about. I wonder how much the kingdom is like that.

Even in these parables, as Jesus is telling them, he is addressing it in an unusual way. He's telling stories. If you think about each of these parables, one is probably about a plowman, somebody plowing a field for somebody else.

Another is about a woman. I wonder how often women are used as examples in teaching stories. This woman is putting yeast into the flour. It says three measures. We think of it as three cups. It's more like gallons of wheat that she's putting the yeast into. It's a sense of doing a little thing having a big effect, suggesting in some way that this woman is powerful in a time that probably discounted women.

He's talking about the sower of the seed, a farmer. So we have the farmer, the woman, the plowman, the merchant, and the fisherman. He's hitting this whole realm of folk who probably don't get included in a sense of power, who don't get included in the sense of being pure folk who are important and privileged in that society. Often these would be the people looked down on. And yet, here are these stories about them and about how they can engage in the kingdom itself, and how the kingdom may be active in what they are doing. It's an incredible way of looking at the kingdom as embracing them all.

The last couple of parables bring out the incredible nature, the value of discovering that the kingdom is present. The hidden treasure. The pearl that the man was willing to sell everything to buy. When they find something of incredible value, they are willing to sell everything they have to have it. To give away, to get rid of all that they have in order to have what is so valuable. It seems to me that Jesus is inviting us to recognize that when we recognize the kingdom among us, when we see the fermentation, the germination, the growth, there is something really incredibly valuable happening among us. Jesus suggests that when we can encounter it, it is worth letting go of everything else to engage with it. We can see that it's both in the old and the new, and there is something God is present in and is doing. We can be part of it.

I think it's Paul that helps us see what might be the kernel, the seed, the thing we discover. We discover that Jesus himself—the one telling the story, the one giving us this gift—is showing us the very love of God. Paul suggests that it is a love that nothing in all creation can separate us from. The end of that Romans passage suggests that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. I think it is that discovery, finding that kernel, that seed that we need, that yeast that leavens our lives, that moves us in new ways. It is as that is shared among us we become different people. We learn to care for one another and to share in God's grace.

*Kingdom* is an interesting word that these parables seem to redefine. They change it from something about power and domination and privilege into something about an organic way that love grows, that God's grace is shown. When we begin to experience and share the realization that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, fermentation happens, germinations begins, and that—that changes everything. Amen.