

26 October 2004 / Chapel homily / Luther Seminary / Luke: 13: 18-21 / Mary Hess

Jesus said, "What is the Kingdom of God like?
To what can I compare it?
It is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in the garden.
When it was fully grown, it became a large bush
and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches."

Again he said, "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?
It is like yeast that a woman took
and mixed in with three measures of wheat flour
until the whole batch of dough was leavened."

"What is the kingdom of God like?"

One of the reasons I like the discipline of praying with the daily lectionary is that it forces me to confront questions like this, whether or not they are the questions at the front of my mind on any given day.

At this moment, however, it turns out that this question *is* at the front of my mind, brought there in part because of the claims being made all around us.

In case you've just arrived here at Luther, or perhaps have been living the life of a hermit, I should point out that today is October 26th. We are exactly one week away from a national election here in the US.

If you have been paying any attention at all to the mass media, you will have already noted that this week in particular has been the week of "faith on display." President Bush has made strong statements throughout his term in office about his personal faith, and this week Senator Kerry did so as well, speaking at a major event in Florida where he laid out the claims his faith makes on his actions in the world.

I doubt that many people are content to listen respectfully to each of these candidates and simply make their choices accordingly. Most of us have been drawn actively into argument and participation in the electoral process. That is a good thing! But far too often that good thing – that engagement in active deliberation and advocacy – has been overshadowed by *fear* of the potential outcome.

The hyperbole coming from all sides in this campaign season implies that if the wrong person gets elected we will enter a very dark period of time in United States history. Indeed, some religious leaders have implied that we will be deliberately turning away from supporting the kingdom of God.

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether a national government even “ought” to support the kingdom – and there are strong arguments for and against that stance embedded in most Christian communities – I’d like to ponder for a moment what these parables might help us to see in the midst of this kind of fiercely fought national campaign.

What is the kingdom of God like?

“It is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in the garden.

When it was fully grown, it became a large bush and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches.”

And

“It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch of dough was leavened.”

Like most of the parables from the gospels, these are pungent, down to earth, told in metaphors that are intimately familiar to Jesus’ listeners. They are also *not* what a listener might expect as a comparison to the Kingdom.

Walter Wink once wrote that “parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives”

That description is itself is a bit of a parable – something hard and ugly squeezed through a metamorphosis into something of great value that even then only grants us a tiny bit of lens through which to catch a glimpse of something infinite.

These metaphors – the mustard seed, that smallest of seeds, or the leaven, that living creature which multiplies throughout bread dough – these are metaphors of transformation. They offer us hints of the transformation the kingdom of God effects in our lives.

I’ve heard these parables most of my life, and to be very honest, have grown somewhat inured to them, particularly that of the mustard seed – which has been used as the governing metaphor for countless attempts to create positive change from the margins, to invite people to recognize how important their own contributions to a larger project can be.

But what I have not heard as clearly until now is the invitation to death these metaphors also invite. You see, the thing about planting a seed is that by the time the plant has come to full growth that specific seed has disappeared. Or in the case of leaven, particularly of the yeasty variety, the organism that shares its exhalations, that breathes, quite literally, using its exhaled gases to grow a loaf of bread dough, that organism dies in the baking of the bread. It has contributed to something much larger than itself, been intimately a part of that growth and development, but doesn’t live to see the process to completion.

This death is not an empty death, but it is a death nevertheless. It is a death that reconciles us through its promise of shared significance.

Arland Hultgren puts this theme well when he writes:

“the parable speaks a word of promise. The seemingly insignificant acts of work and witness by the disciples of Jesus are of ultimate importance.”

So we can rest securely in the knowledge that no matter what we see in our own limited view, we will have participated in the reign of God.

At the same time, however, in the paradoxical way in which parables mostly seem to function, we must also recognize that ***we can not know*** what this reign will look like, or what the signs of its coming will be.

Here again is Prof. Hultgren:

“Sometimes one is tempted to look for signs of the kingdom. As the dough rises, one thinks that it is possible to see the effects of the leaven. Surely there must be signs of the kingdom. There may well be, but the parable reminds us that, as the leaven is hidden, so is the kingdom. Events in nature and history are too ambiguous to be faithful and certain signs.”

And at the end, is death. As Christians we believe in a death that beckons us into a new life, but it is death of one kind nonetheless.

Transformation. The metamorphosis of a tiny grain into a huge, life-bearing plant. The transformation of a small amount of leaven into the nutty warmth of a loaf of fresh bread.

Transformation – a complete shift from where we began into something beyond our comprehension.

In the midst of this hard fought campaign season, awash in the symbols and language of communities of faith – actually, let’s be honest, the language and symbols of the *Christian* community of faith – Christians need to remember that we are not capable of seeing fully what God has in store. Nor can we expect to do anything more than participate, each in our own way, to the fullest extent of the gifts God has equipped us with, in the coming of thisS kingdom.

Surely some of that participation involves active engagement in public discourse, active work towards the common good amidst the communities we are embedded in. But just like the yeast, just like the mustard seed, we will not see the end of our efforts, nor will we be the same after our participation. Indeed, God does a new thing with each of us, but that new thing comes about through a baptism into death.

I am tired of the grand claims being made on the many sides of this election campaign. Yes, we are making an important choice this year. Yes, there are very real policy differences between these two candidates. But regardless of who gets elected it is not, finally, up to human beings to make the kingdom come to reality.

We must rest secure in the knowledge that God is working within our world and that knowledge can bring us *hope*. But that knowledge ought to grant us a deep *humility* as well. No matter the outcome of this election we are each called to continue our work as yeast, to continue to spread our roots into the fertile soil of the public sphere and to seek the common good. We cannot allow despair borne out of hubris to drive us out of participation, but neither can we allow hubris borne out of a specific understanding of Christian identity, to keep us from participation in public, political processes.

In just a moment, we'll have the opportunity to meditate with a piece of music. Listen to its text –

“Behold, God does a new thing,
through death God brings new life.”

The transformation we are involved in, the bringing about of the kingdom in which we are already embedded, is not wholly visible. We move amidst the processes of the world in which we live, we must participate in them, but we can not claim transcendent vision, and we must not assume that we can in any way specify what only God, finally, will bring to fruition.

AMEN.