

“What Is the Kingdom Like?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 13:31-33; 44-46
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on July 30, 2017

What strikes me first about a pearl of great price, a seed, and a measure of yeast is how small they all are. Small enough to fit in your pocket, small enough to lose, small enough to slip through your fingers. What do these three items have in common? They are oh so tiny.

Despite their miniscule size, there is more to them than meets the eye. More to them than what you can see from the outside. Imagine! It can fit in the palm of your hand, but there’s a whole kingdom on the inside.

The very first thing Jesus ever says as part of his public ministry in the Gospel of Matthew is about the kingdom. Matthew chapter four reports that after Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and after he hears that his cousin John had been arrested, Jesus leaves Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum by the sea, and that from that time on, Jesus proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” or, “the kingdom of heaven is near.”

According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is arriving, is here. Which, frankly, doesn’t make a lot of sense when ungodly kings are still on the throne with no signs of budging and Jesus shows no signs of staging a coup. Instead, he does small things like tell stories by the seaside and dine with sinners and heal the sick.

Meanwhile, Herod is killing babies and beheading prophets. For people who are living under the oppression of a kingdom that is not of God, what does it mean for Jesus to say the kingdom of heaven is near, is here? This is the message Jesus proclaims after his cousin is arrested, but shouldn’t it sound more like this . . . “The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Take up your arms!” Instead when Jesus speaks about the kingdom, he talks of seeds and yeast and planting and bread making, and it is all so maddeningly insignificant in comparison to the scope of the problem.

What *is* this kingdom Jesus speaks of that is better imagined as a woman kneading dough than as a king on his throne? What is this kingdom that is better imagined as a shade tree than a military force? Does Jesus even understand how the real world works?

In Jesus’ view, this kingdom is worth more than all the other kingdoms combined. This kingdom is more valuable than we know. This kingdom is worth everything you have. This kingdom is like a treasure—not on display in a palace for all to see, but hidden in a field. A treasure hidden in a field that some ordinary person discovers, then sells all he has to purchase the field. Or, to the one who is searching, the kingdom of heaven is like finding that one pearl of great value. Is this making any sense to you yet?

As a matter of principle, I don’t usually do football illustrations, but they say there’s a first time for everything. I recently read about that receiver for the Atlanta Falcons who hired divers to search the bottom of a 65-foot deep lake in Georgia to look for the earring he lost when he fell

off his jet ski. Why such effort for something so small? The earring was worth between \$100 and \$150 grand.

This is sort of what Jesus is getting at when he talks about the man who sold everything he had to buy the field with the treasure. Of course, the kingdom has a different sort of value than Jones' earring. It isn't something to be appraised like a pearl or a diamond. Good luck trying to sell the kingdom on Ebay. It is of extraordinary worth, and yet, it cannot be bought, cannot be priced, is not even recognizable to the profit-making experts.

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle,” said Jesus, “than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Perhaps that is true or perhaps it was a bit of Messianic hyperbole—either way, it is a line that catches your attention, a line that ought to cause most Americans to halt in their tracks. If the Gospel doesn't do something to disrupt and disquiet the rich, then it cannot possibly be good news for the whole world.

Yet to those who have eyes to see, this kingdom is a treasure.

What is this kingdom of which the good Lord speaks? Is it a seed you plant in the soil and tend to patiently while you wait for it to grow? Is it more like yeast you work into dough—like a magic ingredient you add to your life to make it rise? Or is it more like something you discover unexpectedly, like being in a field or on a mountaintop or in the wilderness and suddenly, there is God, clear as a burning bush or a vision or a buried treasure. Is the kingdom something you enter or something that enters you? Something you sow or something you reap? Something you search for or something that finds you? Something you aid and abet or something independent of your meddling? Is it something you can see or something that cannot be seen? Is it yet to come or already here?

According to Jesus, *yes*. The answer is: D. All of the above. No wonder he spoke in parables. A mere treatise on the kingdom would never do.

Lately I've been attending to my new house, and part of that work has been trying to keep all my new house plants alive. It is amazing to me how much attention it can take on my part to keep one little plant going, and yet there are entire forests humans did not plant but only discovered. It is amazing in a terrible way that a magnificent forest that has self-perpetuated through the centuries can be utterly felled by a single carelessly discarded cigarette or a single greedy company. Forests and trees remind me of God's work in this world, beautiful and majestic and miraculous—in so many ways self-sustaining, existing and expanding long before we ever wake—and yet so vulnerable to our destruction. So resilient after drought and fire yet so often dependent on humanity for preservation. Independent yet in need of care. Enduring, yet fragile.

God's kingdom will always be forest—far bigger than you or I, more expansive than you can see, more fabulous than anything you could ever create alone, too irrevocably wild for you to possess, tame, or define. *And* God's kingdom will always be seed—small enough that you can plant it. Small enough that you could lose hold of it, small enough that you won't believe it contains a forest.

Look, Kyndall, cut it out with all the sappy metaphors. Tell me what I am supposed to *do*. Maybe God's kingdom is here and alive and growing, but from where I sit, I am watching the forest burn. I am watching all this good kingdom work being undone. Reading the morning news is like watching big metal machines take out a forest, like watching concrete poured over green grass and flowers. Tell me what to DO. I've planted my seeds, but the shrub isn't growing fast enough to make a difference! I've prayed and I've prayed and still your children suffer and still your kingdom stays small and rather invisible while other kings and other princes remain on the throne, unshaken. O Prince of Peace, where are you now and where, oh where, is your kingdom?

It's not always what we want to hear, but Jesus says, "Trust the seed." I don't think he means quit working for justice. I think he means keep up your fidelity to the small things and trust that by God's power, your small kingdom acts are bigger than you know. I think he means keep baking bread and sharing it with your neighbors. That isn't a metaphor.

I think he means don't lose heart. This kingdom of heaven to which you pledge your allegiance is worth more than you know, even when you cannot see its fruit. This kingdom is different from all the kingdoms in the world and you cannot force it to grow or make it arrive on your timetable. But that doesn't mean the kingdom is a lost cause, that you ought to give up and throw your faith into the kings of this world instead. No. That would be like forfeiting your soul to try and gain the world, which never works out in the end.

It isn't easy being patient. It isn't easy holding on to something you can't quite see. It isn't easy to maintain reverence for what is small in a world that values big. It isn't easy to believe in slow, nonviolent change in a world torn up so abruptly by violence. It isn't easy to believe in God in a world so often ruled by godless men.

Jesus would recommend that you throw yourself, heart and soul, into this kingdom, regardless of how foolish it might look to do so. Jesus recommends that you trust its value, that you give up everything necessary to hold on to this one treasure that looks like God's love on a throne. Jesus recommends that you keep believing in the seemingly impossible.

Jesus *insists* this dedication is not a waste of your time or your life or your resources. I know. I don't always believe him either. But I want to believe him. And I think the wanting counts for something.

Let us pray together: O God, we want to believe you. We want to believe in your kingdom that transcends all kingdoms. We want to believe that Love really can reign in this world. We want to believe that our waiting is not in vain, our working is not in vain, our faith is not in vain. We want to believe that you knew what you were doing when you sent yourself into this world, not as an army commander or a king, but as a child, a teacher, a healer, a suffering servant. We want to believe you are good, and we want to believe that your kingdom is at hand. Help us to repent of our efforts to do it on our own. Help us repent of our collusion with ungodly powers. Help us repent of our destruction of forests. Help us repent of our unbelief. Turn us into believers, into ones who trust and value Love's reign, who search after your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.