

“Mystery”
Reverend Mary Cunningham Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 13:31-33

³¹He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” ³³He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”



Mystery. We often think of a mystery in terms of books or movies. Best-selling mystery authors like Clive Cussler or Agatha Christie, movies like *Knives Out* or *Psycho* or even children’s shows like *Scooby Doo* all focus on explaining the who or why of some great fictional story that seeks to answer the question, “Who did it?” But the word mystery also describes something beyond our understanding...beyond the limits of our human language or knowledge. It is this second understanding of mystery that describes God and God’s amazing work in our world. All throughout the gospels, Jesus spends a lot of time trying to help us unravel that mystery...or at least to help us begin to grasp the depth of it. In this gathering of parables where we find today’s scripture, Jesus shares a vision of the mysterious Kingdom of God and offers a glimpse into what it is like. True to Jesus’ form, he uses examples from everyday life but then twists the meaning into something unexpected...offering a new understanding to the mystery of God’s kingdom.

The parable of the mustard seed is familiar to many of us. This tiny seed grows into a large bush like tree big enough to host bird life. This seed is the size of a pinhead – tiny and seemingly insignificant. That seed is so small you likely cannot even see it once it is dropped into the ground. But over time and with care it grows, and grows, and grows into a large impressive bush-like tree. Mustard bushes grow to somewhere between 20-30 ft high with a 20-foot wide spread. It is often a truly large bush that provides shelter and a home for nesting birds but - don’t be fooled - it is not the most beautiful of trees.

Earlier in the Old Testament, the Prophet Daniel used a visual of a massive majestic tree sounding much like a sequoia or giant redwood to represent a great kingdom. This image would have been familiar in the people’s minds as to what a successful kingdom would look like. Jesus plays off that image and then flips it to help the disciples and us understand, the Kingdom of God is different. It will begin like a small tiny planted seed that will grow into a great tree but that tree will not be massive and imposing like a huge sequoia tree, it will not be a lofty like a redwood. The Kingdom of God will be unexpectedly simple and real and likely plain...like, well, a mustard bush.

Similarly, Jesus uses the parable of the yeast to once again challenge kingdom expectations. Yeast is smelly and stinky. Yeast is a spoiled or fermented agent that used in a small amount turns flour into fresh delicious bread. In the parable we hear the woman “mixed” the yeast into flour, but it is more accurately translated today as “hides” – the woman “hides” the yeast in the flour. Hiding something sounds almost sneaky! Through this lens, we understand the kingdom of God is actually hidden and working subversively against the powers of the empire to expand and rise and grow into something that will eventually feed the world.ⁱ

Through these parables, Jesus informs the disciples that God’s kingdom begins in small, humble, and almost invisible ways but will grow and become something that invites and provides a place for all. God’s kingdom will appear hidden and then stealthily rise and subversively expand into something that will feed the world.

How amazing God’s kingdom will be! But where is that kingdom? Shouldn’t we see the fruition of God’s kingdom by now?

Today we are now in our 23rd week of worshipping online. Almost 6 months since we have gathered together in our parlor and sanctuary to worship God together. Almost 6 months since we have gathered in choir rooms, Sunday school rooms and youth rooms to sing and laugh and play and share connection. Almost 6 months since we have made lunches,

served dinners, or joined in mission work in person. We are struggling with masks and social distancing. With sending teachers and kids and administrators back into school and classrooms or worrying about what it will mean to keep them all home. We miss our family and friends and coworkers and routines. We are Zoom tired and eager to sit with and hug the very people who feed our souls. And there are people who have no job – no way to work without childcare – who are being evicted from their homes – who have to make a decision between medicine or food. Y'all – where on earth is that Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about?

Remember both the bush and the yeast work slowly and over time. Creeping, infiltrating, spreading, expanding and rising. We are people who want the Kingdom now...but in the great mystery of God's time, we wait and while we wait we look for and hopefully even participate in the glimpses that remind us of the kingdom of God THAT IS HERE building, growing and revealing.

Glimpses like:

4 year old Camryn who was shopping at Home Depot with her mom. Camryn looked over and saw Sherri Gonzalez who happens to be African American – and Camryn stated emphatically and loudly enough for Sherri ...and most of the rest of Home Depot to hear, "Black Lives Matter!" Sherri turned and came over to Camryn and said, "Thank you! Thank you for saying that I matter." Then 4 year old Camryn asked her mom if her new friend Sherri could spend the night. Grown adult Sherri declined but the two families exchanged phone numbers have since become friends. Recently, they held a garage sale together and raised \$2,700 for the education of girls in Kenya.ⁱⁱ

Glimpses like:

European teacher Zane Powels who purchased, made and delivered lunches every day to each of his 85 students beginning when the Coronavirus locked down his school and through the end of year. That's every day for 17 weeks during the period of the school shutdown. He estimates he delivered over 7500 lunches to the students from his class. He knew most of his students came from homes that did not have much and he worried many of them would not eat without it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Glimpses like:

The Detroit Mower Gang who formed when the nearly bankrupt city of Detroit was unable to care for all of their city parks. This group of volunteers connected over Facebook and took off keeping many of the city parks mowed, repaired and ready for use. They even started the "Mowtown Mowdown" which awarded a Grand Champion WWE style gold belt to the volunteer who mowed the most grass in a 12 hour competition. Their work has allowed the city to catch up and now the Gang is transiting to the Enemies of Debris Gang and focusing their efforts on a trash fishing marathon to help clean up the Detroit River.^{iv}

In this time that can feel so very overwhelming, when waves of hopelessness overcome us, when we cannot see the work of the Kingdom, the answer is often all around us. God in all of God's amazing, mysterious, unexpected ways...creeping, infiltrating, spreading, expanding, and rising...and bringing about the kingdom of God in ways beyond our imagination. May our eyes be opened to see the Kingdom that is building all around us and may we hear and respond to the ways God is calling us to be a part of its work.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

End Notes

ⁱ Long, Tom G. Matthew: Westminster John Knox Commentary Series. Westminster-John Knox Publishers. Louisville, KY. 1997. Pp.152-3

ⁱⁱ Ross, Ailsa. August 11, 2020. Some Good News Network. <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/4-yo-yells-black-lives-matter-at-woman-in-home-depot-starting-friendship/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Good News Network. July 9, 2020. Some Good News Network. <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/uk-teacher-delivered-7500-packed-lunches-to-pupils-during-lockdown/>

^{iv} Corbley, Andy. May 23, 2020. Some Good News Network. <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/detroit-mower-gang-volunteers-maintaining-citys-old-parks/>