

**“Glimpses of God’s Realm”**  
**Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**July 30, 2023**

When Dana was at the University of Kentucky, she tried out for the position of baseball kitten. It sounds a little questionable, but it was just the role of a batboy or batgirl, the person who retrieves the bat after each at-bat. At UK, the mascot is a Wildcat. So, they named the role “kitten,” but you had to know something about the game to play the role.

So, they asked her, “Do you know what it means to be *on deck*?” Dana replied, “Yes,” and they left it at that. They didn’t follow up, which was lucky for her, because she is completely disinterested in baseball. On October 30, 2007, when I dedicated the building of the new baseball stadium in Winston-Salem with the mayor, the team owner, and keynote speaker Hank Aaron standing next to me, Dana, Ian, and Ali were there looking like the three most bored people on the planet. “Do you know what it means to be on deck?” “Yes.” No, she didn’t know!

Something similar seems to happen with an exchange in today’s reading from Matthew. Jesus has just told a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven or realm of God, and he asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” They reply, “Yes,” and Jesus leaves it there and moves on to say scribes who have been trained for the kingdom bring out old and new things. Jesus has been talking about nothing short of the realm of God, in parables, witty stories and images, and he wants to know if his disciples, the twelve stooges who seem to miss every point he tries to make, understand. They say, “Yes,” but do they?!

One writer suggests that perhaps this is a humorous exchange. Of course, they don’t understand, ha, ha, ha... But if it is serious, what do we make of it? Well, the truth is nobody really understands, gets it completely, because we are talking about the realm of God. It is too big a reality to comprehend. What Jesus offers in parables are glimpses of the kingdom, images to help fill in some parts of the picture, but even taken together, they only point toward reality.

It's like what we do at funerals and memorial services in trying to affirm the goodness of an individual life alongside the goodness of God. We don't tell all there is to know; we couldn't, even if we had all the time in the world. We provide glimpses that point to the character of a person. This is what Jesus' parables do with the kingdom.

But taking this into account, the parables do tell us specific things that are part of God's realm. What glimpses do today's parables give us? What do they tell us about how God works?

In the first parable, Jesus says the kingdom is like a mustard seed. It is an odd choice for this time because the mustard shrub is viewed in a negative way. It is wild and fast growing, like a weed. Somewhat like wisteria or kudzu, it can take over an area. A saying in the Mishnah warns never to plant a mustard seed in a garden (*Matthew*, Ben Witherington III, p. 268). Yet Jesus says the realm of God is like this seed. He does spend much of his time with the very people others reject. Perhaps it should not surprise us that he uses part of the created world that is viewed in a negative way to point to God's realm.

Mustard has many positive qualities as a spice and curative agent, but here Jesus is talking about how something small can accomplish something big. It begins as one of the smallest seeds but can grow into a shrub large enough for a bird to build a nest in, not really a tree, as the text says, but a large shrub. In Ezekiel 31:6 and Daniel 4:12, the image of a tree hosting birds is a symbol of empire (John T. Carroll, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)). Such is the case here, and it is the empire of God Jesus is describing where little things accomplish much.

We might think of work we do with children. Through weekly activities in Sunday School, missions education, and music, and specific events like VBS and Passport Kids, we teach them simple things about loving others, caring for the created world, and following Jesus. We participate in the most ordinary activities and often feel inadequate. Yet in God's realm, little things grow into big things. Children hold on to basic concepts which God uses to shape them into faithful adults.

We might also think about our clothing ministry. It is so ordinary, seeking to help meet a basic need, but in God's realm, little things grow

into big things. Meeting this basic need enables people to work, study, and get on with life. Caring relationships are formed, often with people who experience very little care. And all of this can be transformative.

Mission work functions this way as well. The Wyatts began their work with immigrants and refugees in Canada and then brought their work to the Triangle. They began here with one Welcome House just a few years ago. Many of us worked in it, helping to welcome people new to this country. Now there are dozens of Welcome Houses across the state. And sometimes what enables a struggling ministry to thrive is not a big idea but something very small.

In his commentary on Matthew, Ben Witherington III tells a story about Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma in the nineteenth century (p. 275). One day, a tribal chieftain had heard enough of Judson's Gospel messages and decided to burn him at the stake. Before they lit the pyre, the chief asked Judson, "What do you think of your God now?" He replied, "The future is as bright as the promises of God."

This surprised the chief who thought for a moment, and then released Judson, saying, "We will talk more of your God." It was a narrow escape for the missionary but also a turning point in his work. It was just one simple sentence, but in God's realm, it was transformative. So it goes with the kingdom. It is like a mustard seed that begins small but grows into something big.

Jesus also says the kingdom is like yeast. This too is an odd choice for Jesus' time. Yeast is almost universally viewed as a symbol of something evil or unclean as in 1 Corinthians 5:6, but here the emphasis is just upon something hidden that can be transformative. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour. As an unseen element makes all the difference in bread, what or Who is at work in God's realm is often not obvious. Some scholars see the woman in this brief parable as an allusion to Lady Wisdom while others view her as Jesus fulfilling the role of Wisdom. Either way it is God who is ultimately at work like yeast amidst flour.

The film "Hidden Figures" tells the story of three African-American women who worked for NASA and helped us get to the moon.

They were brilliant and dedicated workers, mathematicians and engineers, but almost no one knew about them because they were black and female, and it was the early 1960s. They couldn't even use the restroom in the building in which they worked, but without them, we may never have reached the moon.

We'd like to think things are different now. After all, we're talking about the period in which I was a child. But while things may be different, there is no level playing field in regard to race, gender, or certain kinds of work people do. There are always "hidden figures" who are underpaid and seldom recognized. The film industry is dealing with this reality now. We may all soon be watching old episodes of "Gilligan's Island" before long, or perhaps "Homeland" or "Outlander."

God's realm is like this, Jesus says, a hidden figure is at work — Wisdom, Christ, or the Spirit — One who enables good things to happen in individual lives and in society. Tony Campolo said that if we had paid attention to what was happening in the basements of African-American churches in the 1950s, we would have known the Civil Rights movement was coming. The Spirit of God was at work stirring up a good kind of trouble that would lead to justice. Where is God's Spirit at work now and what good trouble might the Spirit be stirring?

It's difficult to see in the moment, God's realm is like a woman working yeast into flour. Thus, it is not our place to judge. Jesus tells another parable about a catch of fish with both good and bad, though the bad are not rotten, they are unclean — *sapra* — in the spiritual sense. The message is very much like the one in the parable about wheat and weeds. It is not our place to judge. Only God can do that. But one day the dough will rise, and there will be bread for all. God's realm will come to be because, seen or unseen, the yeast of the Spirit will do its job.

So, the kingdom is a like a mustard seed and yeast, like a catch of fish, and then the kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price. That is, however we understand God's realm, it is more valuable than anything else. Song of Solomon says, "Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave... if one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned (8:6-7)." The author is talking

about marital love, but he is also using this love as a metaphor for how we relate to God. Nothing is worth as much as that love.

It's why Jesus challenges a rich young man to sell all he has. It's not that wealth is evil. It's just the one thing that stands in the way of the man valuing God more highly than anything else. What stands in our way? Is there anything — possessions or accomplishments, political ideation or sports allegiances, ego or need for control — is there anything? God's realm is the treasure hidden in a field for which we would sell everything. God's ways of love and kindness, justice and peace, healing and salvation, are the pearl for which we would trade all.

You may have heard about a man in Kentucky who found over 700 gold coins from the Civil War era hidden in his corn field. Kentucky was a border state during the war. It is easy to imagine how someone might have needed to hide such wealth with specific markings. Estimates range from one to two and a half million dollars for the value of these coins. The owner didn't know what he had, but we do. The invitation to know the Creator of the world and live into this Creator's plan is a treasure beyond all treasures. What could be of more value?

Yet, as we have said, all these images only give us a glimpse of God's realm. The kingdom is like a mustard seed, yeast, a catch of fish, a treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price... and much more.

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner says our understanding of Eternal Life is at best like the experience you get of a place approaching it at night in a fast train. "Even the saints see only an occasional light go whipping by, hear only a sound or two over the clatter of the rails. The rest of us usually aren't awake enough to see as much as that, or we are mumbling over our nightcaps in the club car. But the day will break and the train will pull into the station, and the ones who have managed to stay with it will finally alight (p. 22)."

It's a helpful reminder about Eternal Life or the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God. Like the first disciples, we don't understand it all, no matter what we say. But we catch glimpses, and if we stay with it, if we act on what we do understand, we will eventually get there. Because God is driving the train, we will get there.