

“Making Sure the Parables Land”

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

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Pastor, professor, and author Zina Jacque says that when her grandson Devon was thirteen, he wrote a rap song and performed it for her with a speed and cadence that baffled her (*workingpreacher.org*). She couldn't follow the rhythm or decode the metaphors his thirteen-year-old brain deployed with such confidence. So, she asked him to share the lyrics with her. He handed her a sheet of paper, and the next time he performed the song, it landed.

Jacque says this is what Jesus is doing in our reading from Matthew 13. He is handing us a piece of paper because he wants the parables to land. He throws out five brief parables in rapid succession, hoping that everyone listening will get at least one of them. He talks about a mustard seed and yeast, hidden treasure and a merchant seeking fine pearls, as well as a net thrown into the sea to catch fish. He moves from agrarian to domestic to commercial and maritime, perhaps even theft, to connect with each person listening. Jesus' logic is not repetition for repetition's sake, Jacque says, but a refusal to leave any pupil behind.

Yet, no matter which parable grabs our attention most, she says, the messages are the same. Jesus wants his followers to know what the kingdom of heaven is like so that we can recognize God's realm and realize how we participate in it. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Jesus tells us what we need to know.

One thing these parables tell us is that the kingdom of heaven is subversive. The intent is not to perpetuate the status quo but to turn things upside down because God's realm is radically different from the Roman Empire in Jesus' day, and though we may think our culture is shaped by Christian values, we are not exactly the kingdom either.

Notice the details of these parables. There is a mustard seed which grows into a large bush, but mustard bushes are considered weeds at this

time. They are the kudzu of first-century Palestine. There is yeast that leavens flour, but yeast is considered a kind of corruption. It bloats and rots corpses, and it is what a woman must remove from the house at Passover. A man finds treasure in someone else's field, doesn't tell the owner about it, but rather buys the field and buries it. Is he not a thief or a deceiver? The merchant may seem respectable enough to us, but in the first century, merchants are seen very much like used car salesmen in our time. The fishermen may be the most respected figures here.

As former Phillips Theological Seminary President Gary Peluso-Verdend notes, one is struck by the shady, subversive, and corrupted presenting character of these parables, especially in contrast to the portrayal in other parts of Matthew 13 of judgment that separates the true disciples from the others (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, p. 284). It isn't quite so clear-cut here. God's realm seems to use questionable characters, not the typical people viewed to be virtuous in the ancient world. In one parable, a female, a woman using yeast, is the protagonist. It is not the norm in this time.

The point seems to be that God's kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. So, the work of God's realm is, by necessity, subversive. It is carried out by the least likely characters in the least likely ways. We get this when it comes to the first century, the faithful, and the Roman Empire. We may not get it when it comes to the twenty-first century, us, and our nation. But do we really embody the values of God's realm?

According to Galatians 5:22-23, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How often do we see these qualities at work?

Jesus talks repeatedly about the love of God and neighbor, the priorities of service and sacrifice, the fact that we cannot serve God and wealth. Though we may seek these priorities, at least at times, how much attention do they get in a culture intoxicated by wealth and power, one form of amusement after another and glorified self-interest?

In the beloved community Jesus envisions, outcasts are welcomed, sinners are forgiven, and everyone has a place at the table. We're living in a time when outcasts are vilified, we shoot our wounded, and many people don't have a place in the country, much less at the table.

Thus, something subversive is still needed. When a society begins to resemble the empire of Rome more than it does the empire of heaven, going with the flow is not the work of the gospel. As New Testament scholar Warren Carter observes while commenting on the corrupting effect of yeast, “If a person is well adjusted in a sick society, corrupting is the only path to wholeness (*Matthew and the Margins*, p. 291).”

Parables are stories which upset established worlds. Jesus’ parables of the kingdom have this effect because he’s painting a picture of how God wants us to live, and we’re not there yet, we’re just not there.

Another thing these parables tell us about the kingdom of heaven is that a lot of this work takes place underground, it is hidden from view, yet it is very real. The tiny mustard seed is hidden in the soil. The yeast is embedded in the dough. The treasure is hidden in a field. The pearl has to be found. The fish have to be caught. And yet, in each case, the results are magnificent! The work of God’s realm is often difficult to observe on the surface, but it produces something wonderful!

I have seen this happen on an individual level. I remember a man in his eighties who was very agnostic. He had studied with a Russian philosopher when he was young and embraced many of his teachings. He attended a Sunday School class week after week but never revealed any willingness to embrace Christian faith until I announced I was leaving whereupon he came to me and asked me to baptize him.

I have told some of you the story of how we talked about his questions and how he had come to accept the heart of the Christian message, yet on the day of baptism, when we talked through the details and I said I would ask him if he accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior, he said with a twinkle in his eye, “I’m going to give my lecture on the multiple I’s.” Since I knew he was kidding, I said, “Joe, I am much younger than you, and much bigger, and we will be in water. You’re going to say, ‘Yes.’” He laughed and said “yes” and his faith was genuine. It had been growing for years, just beneath the surface.

But this hidden dynamic of the kingdom is at work on a social and societal level as well. Tony Campolo once said that if people had paid attention to what was happening in the basements of African-American

churches in the 1950s in the way of spiritual renewal and awakening to the compelling call to justice and liberation in scripture, they wouldn't have been surprised by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. God's Spirit was at work planting seeds and adding leaven in ways hidden from plain sight that eventually gave rise to kingdom work.

Where might God's Spirit be at work in this time preparing the way for some future awakening of faith or accomplishment of justice we cannot even imagine? There is plenty to be discouraged about as church attendance is down and our nation seems to be institutionalizing injustice, but Jesus' parables remind us that God works in ways we may not see and toward results we may not at first understand.

In the 1980s, when Apartheid was still in place in South Africa, Desmond Tutu did an interview with public television in which he said this. "When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray.' When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal (Greg Jones, "Africa and the Bible," www.episcopalcafe.com, July 28, 2007)." It was a strange thing to say, and yet, from the perspective of our faith, not so strange. What often seems most important from the world's perspective — things like wealth and power, land and possessions — isn't from God's perspective, and the better of the deal always lies with God.

One other thing these parables tell us is that the kingdom of heaven involves growth, exponential growth. A tiny mustard seed produces a large bush, up to fifteen feet tall. A tiny amount of yeast leavens enough bread for a wedding feast. God's realm is ever growing in miraculous ways. But it is God's realm that is growing, God's way of justice and love, not simply our little fiefdoms we confuse with God's realm.

In Western culture, we tend to focus on numerical growth — how many people and how much money in our particular setting — because we have practical needs and we understand these metrics, but they don't necessarily equal spiritual growth, which is the focus of the kingdom of heaven. An ever-growing number of people following him is what Jesus

wants, but this means an ever-growing number of people *following* him, not simply paying lip-service to his existence.

There are megachurches throughout this nation which are bucking the trend of declining attendance. It might appear that this is where God's realm is growing, and in some cases, it may be. God bless them! Yet in many of these settings, leaders proclaim a message that directly contradicts almost every teaching of Jesus about helping the poor, welcoming the stranger, practicing forgiveness, seeking peace, doing justice, living simply, and laying down life for others. It is all about prosperity, self-aggrandizement, and judgment. It is difficult to see kingdom growth at work where the heart and mind of Christ are absent.

Furthermore, while people attend churches of all sizes for mixed motives, there is a greater risk of superficiality and entertainment-focus in the largest settings. The ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes once said, "Discourse on virtue and people pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you've got a crowd!" There are many ways to whistle and dance the shimmy, and if the goal is simply to gather a crowd, that is easy enough to do. People gather in large numbers to watch other people play sports and listen to people older than me perform music, but what does it all mean? As Will Willimon has noted, the closer Jesus gets to the cross, the fewer followers he seems to have.

This doesn't mean we should try to empty the pews, but it does raise a question about how tightly we connect faithfulness and numbers. We are called to grow in Christ, we are called to enlarge the kingdom by helping others embrace Christian faith, and the church is called to grow in its witness to Jesus' way of life. We are called to grow like weeds, like dough rising because of yeast, but it's not all about numbers, it's about more and more people becoming more and more like Jesus.

The good news is it will happen. God's realm will grow and it will be worth every ounce of sacrifice required. It is a treasure, a pearl of great price! It may be subversive, and it may develop in ways that are difficult to recognize, but God's ways of love and kindness will prevail. This is what Jesus wants us to know. It is why he strings all these parables together. He wants to make sure the parables land and so do we.