

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like a Parable

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...”

Imagine you are looking for a place to belong. Imagine that you are looking for a group to join, a place to make friends, a place to feel welcome, and a place to feel like you are worth something. It may be at school, and it may be a club, activity, or group. It may be in a new neighborhood, a book club, block organization, or impact group. Or maybe even a church, and the kinds of churches goes on and on.

Think about college. When one goes to college, there is sometimes just as much pressure to join some kind of collegiate or intercollegiate group as there is to pick a major, and there are always a bevy of groups to choose from – be it the animal rights groups, the ski club, or the anti-group group (they gather for the sake of protesting gatherings). Some colleges have tried to help in the decision making process by offering one day for all of the extra-curricular groups to display their identity. The college organizes a “group fair” so you can taste what each group has to offer. Table after table of organizations line the college green, accosting the lost student looking for his next class, hocking ideas, activates and social popularity. Like looking at a carousel of watches, you can stroll on the main green of the campus looking at the tables, the gimmicks and listening to the pleas to join, trying to decide where you might belong.

Imagine that the town of Bryn Mawr has something similar. Imagine a day when every group, social club, church, and anything else can have a table on Lancaster Avenue so people can walk and decide where they may like to belong. Wouldn't that be an interesting day? It would be like speed dating for the socially active. Imagine, remember, conceive of the possibility that you are now looking for some group, club, or movement to join.

Now imagine that at one of those tables you find Jesus. There he is, sitting down in his own metal folding chair behind a table sparsely decorated. There is just one sign, a white piece of paper with the words written in pencil, “The Kingdom of Heaven.” Something is missing. Where are the laminated bookmarks with a vision and purpose written out? Where are the key chains listing a web site to visit? Where are the small candies, the array of racially mixed, generational mixed pictures telling you of the good times everyone has in this group? There is no banner, no tablecloth, no 8x10 glossy colored pictures with descriptions on the back. All you see in this crowd of booths, tables and people selling their own group identity is just a man at a table talking to people as they walk by. Walk up to Christ, and ask him, “what is this ‘Kingdom of Heaven?’” And when you listen to his answer, realize that you are listening with centuries of people before you, you are standing with interested, curious, and skeptical people for hundreds of years. In asking the question, you have joined a group of humanity that is curious to know this Jesus. Realize that you are now listening to Jesus answer the same question that was thrust to him in the first century by the Jews gathered around him, wondering what it was that Jesus had to offer.

This is what it was like at the time when Jesus walked the earth. There were a number of groups vying for members, for followers, and for official recognition, and the establishment could have set up a movement fair, like the one I just described. Richard Horsley writes about these groups in his book *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*. He describes groups of popular prophets offering oracles of judgment, provoking and challenging the establishment of the temple and of Rome. He describes movements led by Zealots who were focused on restoring a legitimate king, the Qumranites, who lived a secluded, monastic life, and the outright revolts of groups in Palestine led by a popularly acclaimed king. There were a number of movements, groups in ancient Palestine, and when Jesus came around, many

wondered to which movement he belong. So we stand with the early Jews in the marketplace of ideas, of revolutions, of zealots, of prophets, and of popular kings, and find Jesus, sitting in his own corner, with a simple message, a simple invitation – “the Kingdom of Heaven.” We go and we ask, what does your group, your “Kingdom of Heaven” offer that can give us hope? We go to the table where Jesus is sitting, and ask to know more. Questions rumble through the crowd and Jesus answers with parables.

For those who need a definition, the Anchor Bible dictionary describes a parable as “an extended metaphor or simile frequently becoming a brief narrative.” It’s an allegorical story to make a point. Jesus hears the questions, and responds with parables. The kingdom of heaven is like... one thing or another.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It isn’t a mustard seed, but like the mustard seed it can grow from the smallest thing to something so enormous that can’t be imagined. A small act, a smile, a kind deed can grow into something you wouldn’t expect in ways you can’t measure, at a pace that can’t be controlled. Maybe you stopped to listen to someone who needed compassion. And then that person turned his or her life around, and then started to work at a homeless shelter. And that person effected other people who turned their lives around, and before you know it, a movement has been started. The movie *Pay It Forward* is about a boy who tries to pass on the idea of a good deed, and the movement explodes. That is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a movement so large that there is room for the birds to nest, and the shade offers comfort for all.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast in the bread. It works in spurts, it works within us, not on the surface. It is a treasure, a great pearl. It is not just a place, but a state of being, it is a way one lives, it is a sense of peace with one’s surroundings and one’s environment. This is more than a 4H club, or a Rotary Club. How can we capture the essence of the kingdom of heaven but through the metaphor and the allegory of the parable.

Yet, listen to who is speaking. This is one who we have witnessed performing miracles. Through the acts of Jesus, the blind have been given sight, the lame have been made to walk, and the poor and oppressed have gone free. Can we assume that the messenger is the message? Can we assume that the way Christ lives is what Christ is preaching? Is then the kingdom of heaven a time, a place of healing? Is the kingdom of heaven a life without oppression and a life of acceptance? Through the gospels, we see that Christ has turned no one away, so perhaps this kingdom of heaven is for everyone. We can’t separate the message from the messenger. We can’t divorce the words from the person speaking them. The life Christ lives is the Kingdom of Heaven, and this makes his parables all that more powerful. What if he is the mustard seed? One simple man reaching out beyond the world. We gather around Jesus and ask, what is it you have to offer, and Jesus offers us a metaphor, a parable of the life, the time, the salvation promised. Healing, hope, and acceptance in a subtle and powerful way are all offered in the Kingdom of Heaven.

We need not stand with the crowd, fixed with time, but can continue to walk with Christ so that we can see and experience more of the Kingdom of Heaven. Walk with Christ to the cross and know the commitment he has given to the Kingdom. This is a commitment where Christ gives his life, all that he has to the Kingdom of Heaven, to the wonderful hope and promise. We now see how serious this Kingdom is, and how profound the parable can be.

Wait a little longer, wait for the resurrection and we now can hear the parable of the mustard seed with new ears. Like that very seed, Christ went into the ground, and came up new, changed, and yet at the same time the very Christ we buried. But now we find redemption, we find a profound acceptance and a powerful forgiveness that can only be known through the cross. What power, what depth those parables now hold. When we continue to walk with Jesus we see and realize that this Kingdom of Heaven is something so profound and so powerful that the death and resurrection of Christ become the center and the source of the yeast, the seed. It is the treasure, the pearl offered to us all. The good news is not just the words spoken but is also found in the one who is speaking, and we listen, and watch, and begin to fully understand all that Christ is truly offering.

But don’t be so hasty to jump up and walk with Christ. Let’s be practical and pragmatic and read the fine print. How much will it cost us? What are the dues, what are the expectations, and how much

time will this movement take out of our already busy lives? Because we could always join the potting club, and maybe they don't offer the Kingdom of Heaven, but they do offer a nice pot for plants at a reduced price of \$10.95 and only ask for one day a month. So what will it be, Jesus? What will it cost for us to be a part of your group, your movement?

Again we ask with centuries of Christians, skeptics, followers and believers before us. Again, we ask with the Jews in ancient Palestine listening to Jesus. And again, Jesus answers with a parable. Think if you found a field with a treasure and you sell everything for that field with the treasure – that is how much. Think if you found a pearl that was very valuable, and you sold everything for that pearl - that is how much. Everything you have is expected.

The great preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, wrote about his conversion, his decision to become a part of this movement. As a child he experienced tastes of the Kingdom, as he says, “a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense... if I might enjoy that God and be rapt up to him in heaven and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever!” More than once, Edwards experienced this divine vision where he tasted, experienced and felt the love and the grace that the Kingdom of God offers. Yet he never fully committed to the movement, to the idea, or to Christ. Finally, on January 12, 1723, Edwards made, “the solemn dedication to God... giving up myself, and all that I had to God; to be for the future, in no respect, my own; to act as one that had no right to himself, in any respect. And solemnly vowed, to take God for my whole portion and felicity; looking on nothing else, as any part of my happiness, nor acting as if it were; and his law for the constant rule of my obedience...” (From Jonathan Edwards' *Personal Narrative*)

What do we owe but all that we have, all that we are, our very lives. That's all it will cost – all that we have. What is sold for the field? All that the man has. What does the merchant give for the pearl? All that he owns. Edwards gives his life to God, and there is nothing more that we can give than that. Maybe you have already been there. Maybe you have experienced that conversion, that full body, that complete giving conversion. It is that moment when you no longer think your faith through, you no longer just feel your faith through, but your whole body, your whole essence, your mind and your heart, all that you are gives in to the Kingdom of Heaven. Remember, that the Kingdom of Heaven is not just a place, but a way of living, it is a being and we commit all that we are to that initial conversion. So we fall on our knees and say take my life, God. We are overcome with emotion and give all that emotion to God. Our questions, our doubt, if it is just for a moment, we give to God, and ask God to plant the mustard seed, to place the yeast in our lives. Jesus is calling us to the kingdom, and all it will cost is you, your life, all that you are.

But we don't stop there. This is a lifetime commitment, this is an ongoing process, this commitment to the kingdom. Being a part of the Kingdom is an investment and we have to stay invested to begin to reap the return. The giving, the letting go that we are called to risk, is a daily task that we are challenged to engage. Remember the mustard seed? We don't know how long it will take to grow. We don't know the shape of its growth, or the direction of its roots. All we can do is say yes to God, and continue to trust God. Don't look for results, because you won't immediately find them. Don't try to force the Kingdom, because you can't. Instead you must trust and you must hope. Remember that idea, hope? Last week I spoke about the hope we offer to God. It was a hope based in something yet to be, but something we have experienced and that we know. That same hope carries us as we walk with Christ. This is a hope that the yeast in our lives will work and will effect us. This is a hope that the seed in our lives will grow and will change us. Even though we can't see the results, even though we can't control the results, we continue to hope. In this hope, we let go and give God the control of the kingdom. After all, it isn't our kingdom, is it? It is the Kingdom of Heaven, and as John Calvin describes it, it is a theocracy – it has God in control. Or as Luther describes it, the Kingdom of Heaven is a realm of divine grace, and we can only be moved by that grace, not the other way around. So say you know someone who needs to know the Lord. Part of being in the Kingdom, part of following Christ is to share your hope and your joy with that individual. But you cannot force the person to become a Christian. All you can do is plant the

seed and then let God do the work. Or think of this church. This church is like that loaf of bread, our actions are like the yeast. But we cannot control the fermentation of the yeast. We cannot make the church become vibrant on our own time with our own schedule. No, instead we must act with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and wait for God to work with us.

This is the movement that we have pledged to join. A movement that works in ways we cannot see, a movement that goes in directions we cannot control, and yet it is a movement that is guided by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. But remember who it is that we are follow, it is Jesus. Remember where Jesus goes – to the cross. That is how committed Christ is to this movement, to this group, to this body. And we know to have hope, because Christ was raised, hope is eternal, the kingdom is eternal. Each day, give to God. Each decision give to God. Your whole life – give to God. This is a life commitment – are you ready to join?

Are you looking for a group to join? Are you looking for a group that will accept you no matter what? Are you looking for a group that will love you and care for you no matter what? Come, join the movement that is following Jesus. Walk with these people who are walking with Jesus and know that there is room for you. Jesus invites you, offering you a place in the Kingdom of Heaven, right here and right now. Say yes, take his hand, and give him your life. Say yes, walk his walk, and be with him at the cross. Say yes, every day and rejoice in the great treasure, in the great riches you have found in the kingdom. Say yes, and let God led you from here, working with you, working through you, and being the yeast, the seed in your life. Say yes to Jesus, join his group, be part of the kingdom, and know that hope is eternal. Will you say yes?

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