Matthew 13:31-33

31 He 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.’

**The Parable of the Yeast**

33 He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid within three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

Like a Can of Worms

In April of 1963, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led a protest against discrimination that was occurring against African American workers in Birmingham, Alabama. The protests were met with water cannons and police dogs and dozens of arrests. Having no funds to post bail of those who were imprisoned, King recognized that his best course of action would be to show solidarity with his fellow protestors by joining them in jail. He spent eleven days in jail in Birmingham, Alabama on the charges of “parading without a permit.”

While he was in prison in Birmingham, he read an article in the Birmingham daily newspaper, an article written by a local pastor who referred to Kind as a “troublemaker.” Later, while still in prison, King received a letter from eight fellow clergymen from Alabama urging him to end his civil rights campaign and allow the courts to handle the cases of discrimination and injustice. His response to that letter was smuggled out of the jail in a tube of toothpaste. King responded to his fellow clergymen by saying “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor.” Unless the white community was brought to a point of crisis, by non-violent, economic forces, nothing would change. And so King continued to lead the Civil Rights movement until an assassins bullet would end his life in 1968.

We often forget that Martin Luther King was not only a social activist but a Christian minister, on a Christian mission that is no different from our mission, which is to build the Kingdom of God in our midst. We also forget that many of his fellow ministers criticized Martin Luther King for his open protests against segregation and injustice. Sadly, those who do not directly experience injustice are too often indifferent to the suffering of others. What’s worse, those who prosper through the exploitation of others often resist any effort to free those who suffer from the throes of injustice. There still are people within the Church who would defend their own comfort level at the expense of other’s rights and well-being. They advocate God’s kingdom **in theory only** as they strive to maintain a kingdom of their own making here on earth.

These two parables, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast, address the sad truth that not everyone embraces the kingdom of God. Each parable has a similar surface meaning that is easy for everyone to understand and accept, yet there is an underlying meaning to these parables that is much harder to swallow. The surface interpretation of these parables is that the kingdom of heaven starts out small, like a mustard seed or yeast, and grows quite rapidly, like a mustard plant or leavened bread, into something so much greater in size and scope. But we can’t leave it at this; there are too many details that Jesus throws into these parables that leave us (once again) scratching our heads.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we must start by asking, “Why a mustard seed?” True, it is a small seed. But a mustard plant was a weed, certainly not what you’d want to grow in your field. It was a shrub that a farmer would want to eradicate. And if you sowed mustard seed in your field along with wheat, you were violating Mosaic law. Who would do such a thing? Finally, the mustard plant does not grow into a tree – Jesus would have known this. It was a shrub that could get big if not weeded out, but it certainly didn’t compare to a cedar of Lebanon. In fact, why wouldn’t Jesus use that example: *The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed that grows into a beautiful cedar tree.* A cedar tree is a lot nicer looking and more useful than a mustard shrub.

And in the parable of the yeast presents more problems. We imagine yeast as the leavening agent for bread that comes in convenient little packets, but in ancient Israel, it was formed by taking a piece of bread and leaving it in a damp, dark place until mold formed. Leaven was a symbol for moral corruption: it was leaven that was what one ate everyday – common, unholy. If you wanted to use positive imagery, you would speak of unleavened bread, which was holy, clean, and eaten on sacred occasions. But Jesus doesn’t stop here. This leaven is hidden (*krypto)*, not kneaded (*phyrao)*, in a lot of flour (about fifty pounds!) by a *woman*. Women in Mediterranean culture were also considered unclean and consequently excluded from religious ceremonies, certainly in Judaism. So Jesus is using three wrong metaphors as he characterizes the Kingdom of Heaven in this parable: Leaven instead of unleaven, secretly hidden instead of openly mixed into, and this is done by a woman and not a man.

What exactly is Jesus getting at by presenting us with these provocative images in his parables? The kingdom of heaven becomes big in a short time, but what does it grow into? A useless shrub? A food that spoils quickly and is unclean, secretly made that way by unclean hands? Jesus is up to his old tricks again and challenges our notion of the kingdom of heaven just as he challenged those who listened to him two thousand years ago. Jesus is essentially asking us, “Is the kingdom of heaven something you can handle? Will your own preconceptions about ‘clean’ and ‘unclean,’ ‘holy’ and ‘unholy,’ ‘pure’ and ‘impure,’ prevent you from recognizing or embracing it?” The book of Acts recounts how the young church began with such high ideals; everyone shared everything and all needs were satisfied. But it didn’t take the Church long to run into problems; it had to assign deacons to oversee the distribution of food to the widows because the Jewish widows were receiving a greater proportion of the food than their Greek sisters. Prejudice was rearing its ugly head. That prejudice has remained with the Church throughout the centuries. Prejudice manifested itself in the opposition to the Civil Rights movement in America as there were many God-fearing Christians who wanted Martin Luther King Jr. to abandon his campaign, who thought African Americans should just deal with injustice as they had done for over three hundred years. Wasn’t Martin sowing shrubs? Hiding leaven in the flour? He was doing nothing more than advancing God’s kingdom, a kingdom that was unattractive to his white brothers and sisters. Can we not look at this nation today, indeed look at our own church, and be thankful that Martin planted shrubs?

And who else besides Martin Luther King Jr. is out there throwing mustard seeds and hiding leaven? Who embraces God’s plan for our world and takes initiative to effect change in the world? Today we baptize little Annika Noelle, a girl who, had she been born a hundred years ago, would have been raised in a culture where women had no expectation that they would ever be allowed to vote. Today her parents can be assured that she will someday vote for a President. In fact they can be assured that she may even run for President.

And you and I can help her gain a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. We can ensure that, within this church, we embrace all the values that are part of being Christian. We can set a good example for her by not only feeding and clothing those who are unable to feed or clothe themselves; *we can be their advocates as well,* so that they have every opportunity to grow and prosper. Being a Christian sometimes means that we have to plant shrubs, we have to hide leaven in the flour. We have to shake complacent Christians out of their comfort zone and remind them that God’s kingdom is for *all* people, and his kingdom can only be realized when all people can enjoy the same freedom, the same rights.