

Luke 13:18-21

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

18 Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? 19 It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”

20 Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds[a] of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

The Kingdom of God is Like ...

Anna Carter Florence teaches preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary. At last year’s Festival of Preaching Northwest she told us that she assigns a parable a week to her students. She wants them to go out into the world and watch for the times and places where the realm of God touches the earth. She says a preacher is a person who pays attention to God’s kingdom breaking in and then finds words to communicate that. She says to let the Biblical text be your partner in showing you how to do this ... she says to see the world around you and the people in it and speak to them in their language, see where they sit in the light and the dark ... show them how to recognize the Kingdom of God come near to them in the troubles and the joys of this life.

Jesus says “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Luke 13:18-21)

Parables are so wonderful to preach, they have their own simple power, in the unexpected, in the image itself, the message of God’s kingdom being bigger and yet closer than our imagination can fathom ... who doesn’t love a great parable about the kingdom of God?!

Have you heard this one? The kingdom of God is like a Special Olympics Basketball game ... this is a new parable that was revealed to me during the BC Winter Games held in Mission in February last year. I was truly busy, but I had signed up for a shift as a score keeper for one game and despite all my eagerness to drop out of this one shift, I showed up and followed through. To my amazement the three hours of scorekeeping provided me with a profound glimpse into what our broken world could look like with God's mending. These were three hours when the world stood still for me and God's Kingdom broke through. I left that Friday morning knowing something big had happened to me, I'm still not sure how to put it into words except that I think the Kingdom of God is like a Special Olympics Basketball game. A game where the teams are made up of women and men, young teens and ripe middle agers, physically and mentally disabled people coached by life-long competitive athletes, all of them playing together, **seriously, playing, together**. There is no lightening up on the rules, the refs call the game as they see it, the shot clock runs and the coaches expect the players to perform plays and to score. The scorekeeper must keep meticulous records of each foul and every player's baskets for every quarter and yet, the joy and freedom of the game is palpable, everyone involved is there for a bigger reason than to win a game, and still they work very hard to win the game.

The Kingdom of God is like a Special Olympics basketball game where the star player scores again and again and again and then suddenly stops short of yet another perfect shot to pass to the meek girl with Down's Syndrome who is nearly too afraid to step onto the court. And upon finally getting her hands on the ball after the three passes she has missed already, she shoots an improbable shot from near the three point-line and it goes in. And when the refs and the scorekeeper and the time keeper doubt the shot was from outside the three-point line, upon the urging of the of the opposing team's coach they give her the three points. The Kingdom of God is like a Special Olympics basketball game where the play is going just as taught by the coach, clockwork on the court, except for the fellow with the ball stops to try an impossible shot, just to see if it might work this time. It doesn't and the game carries on as if this experiment were expected, like a fantastic lay-up that just barely missed. No ridicule from the coach or team for going maverick on the play, just acceptance and a try again attitude. The Kingdom of God is like a Special Olympics basketball game where the competition against opponents is real and yet somehow everyone is on the same team, where the score is kept and yet no one checks to see who won, where the events that excite and disappoint are more about the collective experience than about any one individual, where the brave ones and the leaders are made up of the least of us.

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is unexpected like the size of the mustard plant from such a small seed, it surely infiltrates our world with a quiet life-giving power like the yeast in the flour, it provides beyond our imagination like the mustard plant making a nesting spot for the birds, its beginnings like a seed seem simple and yet its results are profound, like leaven. Jesus taught his followers in words they could understand and using images from the life they experienced every day. In The Book of Revelation, we are told that the time is near, that Jesus is the one who is and who was and who is to come ... Matthew tells us repeatedly that the kingdom of God is near and in Luke it is "even among" us ... In God's kingdom the time is always NOW – so why not discover some NOW parables for God's kingdom – here within and among the people you serve.

Each of us serves in a particular context. One place I serve is at Camp Douglas. Young people chronically wonder why their time away at Christian camps are such mountain top experiences compared to their everyday life. Perhaps it is because the Kingdom of God is like a popular young man who goes to camp to make a name for himself but ends up cleaning up after and humbly caring for an emotionally disturbed boy who in his brokenness needs compassion, not popularity. Perhaps young people adore their time away at camp and come home transformed because the Kingdom of God is like a Christian camp where the odd one out finds a place to belong and even become a leader. Maybe because the Kingdom of God is like a day at camp. The day of a young person so often bookended and punctuated by social media and the meanness of the world, at camp lives into a time that ticks along with scripture, prayer, praise, bible study and devotions as the sign posts of the day. Perhaps the kingdom of God is like a Christian camp where in their time away young people can leave home for a week and find their true home in the heart of their Saviour Jesus for eternity. Maybe we who spend time at camp have an advantage seeing God's kingdom at work in real time because it is quieter and more focused there, but talk to any one of God's faithful followers and you will find that Kingdom parables actually are available for new discovery in every context of our life with God.

If we believe in an active, life-giving God who is alive and in motion in this world, who grows us like a mustard plant and rises up like leavened flour, then we must learn and teach others how to recognize God's liveliness all around us – the Kingdom of God has come and is yet to come – the more you look for it, the more you will see it, the bigger you preach it, the more others will see it. The Kingdom of God is like ... a General Assembly full of the joy of serving the Lord. Amen.

Mighty God,
in whom we know the power of redemption, you stand among us in the shadows of our time.
As we move through every sorrow and trial of this life, uphold us with knowledge of the final morning
when, in the glorious presence of your risen Son, we will share in his resurrection,
redeemed and restored to the fullness of life
and forever freed to be your people. Amen.