

**July 26/27, 2008**

**Are you starting to get a handle on all this?**

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

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He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a scrawny, red-neck kid from Mississippi, who Ron Wolf took and sowed on the fields of Lambeau. He was the least of all players, but when he was grown, breaking all records and surpassing all wins for a quarterback, the fans of the bleachers and the players of the field could come and marvel at his greatness.

That was then ... this is now. I don't have a Packer parable for today. If I did, I'm afraid it wouldn't be very generous.

Oh, don't get me started on Brett Favre. I broke up with him.

Today we hear the kingdom parables. “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” In this reading alone today we hear about the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure, the pearl and the dragnet. We could spend 5 weeks on 5 parables, but I'll just focus on two. Guess which two. (eat the mustard sandwich)

That mustard seed parable ... even if you don't know scripture very well, chances are you've heard this one. It's really a sweet and lovely little image: the tiny little seed grows into a mighty tree, with birds nesting in its branches. And Jesus says: “do you get it?” we say, “Oh, yes. Of course we get it ... the seed represents the church ... it begins small, with Jesus and the

motley crew of disciples and grows into a worldwide church with enough room for everyone.

Even if you don't identify it with the church, you can probably still hear and understand that the kingdom of heaven is something powerful and **mysterious.**

Mysterious, like the yeast, in the second parable, the agent that causes the dough to rise. And what does it do? It helps in producing loaves and loaves and loaves of bread.

Just a little sidebar here on the yeast: in the original text – in the original language of the New Testament – Greek – the woman HIDES the yeast in the dough. Our translations say she's works it in or mixes it in. The yeast is hidden. Hold on to that.

“Yes, Jesus,” we say, “we understand these parables.” Of course we do because we are educated, rational, and intelligent human beings. We understand the biology behind the natural process of the growth of plants. We understand and have experience that when you plant a seed and nurture its growth, something will happen. We understand the physical reaction of yeast and that it causes bread dough to rise because of the chemical process of carbon dioxide. Yeah, sure, we understand (taking a bite of the mustard sandwich) ...

But here's the catch – with Jesus there was always a catch ... A parable is a riddle. These little stories, these little parables, are more powerful than we can even begin to understand.

We might see the mustard seed story as a sweet story, but the mustard tree that Jesus speaks of is a **weed**, and no one in their right mind would plant a wild, fast growing-weed in their garden. This is **insulting** to the religious leaders who are listening to Jesus ... living a Jewish life meant living a life of stability and order and a mustard seed growing in your garden ??? That simply represents disorder and chaos. And here's Jesus ... telling the people that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed ... well that is ridiculous.

The same with the yeast. The religious community that heard the words of Jesus would have been offended because they considered yeast to be unclean and corrupt. The Bible told them so, since the scriptures used “unleavened” as a metaphor for the Holy. And here's Jesus, telling a story about a woman who is hiding the yeast in the dough. She's hiding it. And that's what the kingdom of God is like? That's nuts. And for the religious leaders, it's not just nuts ... it's unorthodox.

Even though the religious leaders of his day heard the words of Jesus, he wasn't talking to them. Jesus came for whom? Jesus came for the mustard seed people, the weedy people. In any garden, you get rid of the weeds. You pull 'em, you kill 'em ... you eradicate the problem. They're good for nothin'. The movers and the shakers of Jesus' day, they tried hard to get rid of the weeds. Jesus was talking to the weeds, assuring them that the Kingdom of God is like them.

The same with the yeast people, those who were considered unclean and corrupt: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, the widows, men who were unable to fulfill the demands of their religions, women in general. Jesus was talking to them, the yeast, assuring them that the Kingdom of God is like them.

We sent our senior high youth to San Francisco yesterday for mission work. They will be gone for a week. This mission experience is kind of an urban immersion mission program. I'm fairly certain they will meet weedy and yeasty people. People we have tried to push to the margins of our society. Chances are they will do mission work with prostitutes and drug addicts. Chances are they will do God's work with children, using a variety of ministry models: VBS and sports ministry being two of the top ones. The children they will meet and play with will be lonely, abused, and neglected. They will cling to our kids and it will be very, very hard to say goodbye at the end of the week. They will reach out to an elderly population, meeting and greeting those who are neglected and lonely ... quite possibly because of a health care system or because of a system we have created in our society. By the end of the week, our kids will be exhausted, eager to come home, because mission work is challenging ... it's very fulfilling, but it's also very challenging.

Yes, please pray for our youth and adult leaders that they might be touched by the weeds and the yeast and that they might experience a moment or two of what the kingdom is like.

Some of you will remember the story of Robert. I went to seminary with Robert. He was nuts, certifiably nuts. He ate funny food – brought his own food – bags of day old baked goods and weird produce: rutabagas, Brussel sprouts, cabbage, turnips, bruised apples and brown bananas. I later learned that he brought his own food because he couldn't afford seminary food service. And I later learned he would pick up his food at soup kitchens and food pantries ... and would often get the leftovers. Never, ever complaining.

He slept in people's cars or bunked on couches in seminary apartments because he couldn't afford to live in seminary housing. He didn't have a computer and would write his papers in composition notebooks, in flowing, elegant penmanship. He had reserved a study carrel in the basement of the library and that's where he kept 100s of notebooks, as well as his toothbrush and a change of clothes. Though he never spoke of it, I'm sure he found a hiding place in the library where he could sleep. Chicago has cold winters.

He dressed like a little elf, and sometimes, during the day, he wore a red plaid bathrobe. (He's always had something on underneath it). When the high muckety-mucks from the world of academia would visit our campus and attend a worship service, they – and the administration – would frown on his attire. Because he often wore his bathrobe to worship. And he sang in the choir ... in the front row ... so he was fairly obvious.

To us, those who loved him and those who tolerated him, he was just Robert ... and he was weird. To others, he was Jesus. He did the work of the gospel and he ministered to the people: immigrants, refugees, gays & lesbians who were shunned from their faith communities, pregnant

teenagers, alcoholics, crack addicts, the hungry, the sick, the blind and the lame.

The seminary tried to weed him out, because he wasn't like us. He was different. For more than three years, the seminary, the institution – the Christian institution – that had accepted Robert, tried to get rid of him. He did graduate with his master's degree, never affiliating himself with a denomination and I think he lives in Iowa, where I'm sure he continues to be the face, the hands, and the heart of Jesus Christ to people who need him and love him. Robert understands what the kingdom of heaven is like.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? How can I tell you about the Kingdom of Heaven? We all experience it differently. Jesus said that it exists both in the present and in the future. How can any of us speak of the Kingdom?

Perhaps we do it best if we use ordinary things, as Jesus did (mustard and bread), and trust that we, and all of God's people, can make the connections. We simply cannot say with it *is*, exactly, but we can say with it is *like*. It is possible that the kingdom is manifested in ordinary daily life and how we live it.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It is like the Green Bay Packers winning the Super Bowl ... with or without Brett Favre. I don't know ... I haven't made up my mind yet. Okay, okay ... it is like the Milwaukee Brewers winning the World Series. In my experience, the kingdom of heaven is like waking up in the Rocky Mountains without experiencing altitude sickness. It is like my child's room being spotless – everything in

its place – without my nagging. It is like enjoying a cherry pie without having to pit the cherries

We were in Colorado last week, in the mountains. We attended the LOGOS youth conference. Wonderful. On our way, driving thru Nebraska, which takes 5 ½ days, Henry asked, “When we get to the mountains, will I be able to touch the sky?”

I think it was our 3<sup>rd</sup> night in Colorado when I was awakened by the sounds of dueling coyotes. One would sing and then the other would respond ... and I could have sworn they were in the bed next to me. And this went on for some time. Obviously I was awake, so I got up and went to the window. I looked up and the sight took my breath away. We were blanketed, covered by millions and millions of stars. I actually believed that I could reach up and grab a handful. It was stunning. It was like the kingdom of Heaven. I wanted to wake up Henry and tell him that he could touch the sky. Instead I woke up Brent and made him look at the stars with me.

The next night an owl, that I could have sworn was perched on the headboard of my bed, hooted all night long. But that was okay because I wanted to get up and touch the sky again. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

May God give us the grace, the courage, and the power to not only hear the words that can make a difference in our lives, but to be able to act upon them. Amen.