

Today's Gospel Reading offers us five parables that evidence the growth of God's kingdom and are referred to as The Parables of the Kingdom.

All parables teach us four things:

- The inevitability of the kingdom despite its insignificant start
- the infinite value of each one's discovery of that kingdom as an individual
- the universality of God's ultimate reign
- and the fulfillment of the kingdom on the last day, as its false members are expelled.

Robert Farrar Capon authored a trilogy on the parables: The Parables of the Kingdom, The Parables of Judgment and The Parables of the Grace.

The first volume of Capon's trilogy on Jesus' parables, The Parables of the Kingdom covers the short, almost one-sentence parables that occur in the Gospels before the feeding of the five thousand. I commend this trilogy to you in order to learn more about the parables Jesus told.

The first parable describes the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed sown by someone in a field. It is clear this metaphor is extreme. What person would take the time to sow a single, small mustard seed in a field? Planting only one seed is not wise. Yet, if successful, this small seed produces a great shrub, strong and mighty enough for birds, their nests, and the eggs. The emphasis is not on the work of the laborer, but on God's activity – even when it appears small or insignificant. These are comforting and encouraging words. May God take the mustard seeds planted by our congregation, bless them, and use them for the kingdom. Three-year-old Billy was in the back yard helping his grandpa plant seeds. Things were not going well. When Billy placed a seed in the soil, then he quickly screamed and picked it up. Despite it all, somehow enough seeds were planted, and Billy's grandpa put the soil over the seeds. With that action, Billy wailed uncontrollably. All the adults tried to console young Billy, but nothing helped. Billy's grandpa concluded the whole ordeal was a failure. No one thought Billy heard anything about flowers. But sure enough, when Billy would come for a visit, Billy would dash to the back yard and stand over the planted seeds. Finally, when the flowers bloomed, Billy danced with joy. And so did his grandpa.

The Parable of the Leaven is one of the shortest parables of Jesus. It appears in Matthew and Luke. In both places it immediately follows the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which shares this parable's theme of the Kingdom of Heaven growing from small beginnings.

•The kingdom of God may have small beginnings, but it will increase. Yeast is microscopic in size, and only a little is kneaded into the dough. Yet, given time, the yeast will spread through all the dough. In the same way, Jesus' domain started with twelve men in an obscure corner of Galilee, but it has spread throughout the world. The gospel makes progress. •The kingdom of God exerts its influence from within, not from without. Yeast makes dough rise from within. God first changes the heart of a person, and that internal change has external manifestations. The gospel influence in a culture works the same way: Christians within a culture act as agents of change, slowly transforming that culture from within. • the effect of the kingdom of God will be comprehensive. Just as yeast works until the dough has completely risen, the ultimate benefit of the kingdom of God will be worldwide. "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. Yeast does its job, slowly, secretly and silently, but no one can deny its effect on bread. The same is true of the work of grace in our hearts.

Jesus further describes the kingdom of heaven like a treasure and as a pearl of great value for which people will sacrifice much. Ultimately, it is not about the treasure, the pearl, or those who search. This parable is about the joy of the kingdom of heaven. These are parables intended to motivate people to seek the kingdom of heaven and discover joy.

Take some time to ponder a shopper in search of a rare item during the Christmas holiday season. Imagine searching the internet for that item and walking through stores. Imagine your tired body after such a long search. Now imagine your joy in finding that rare article. What would you do if you finally completed your search for a rare item? How would you share that joy? How does this parable help you to understand the kingdom of God?

The final parable of this series takes on a different tone as the shift is made to law. The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown and dragged through the water to catch all kinds of fish – the good and the bad. At

some point the fish will be separated. Next imagine a warm summer day. Feel the sun on your face. See the fishing boats bringing in nets filled with fish. Watch them separate the fish throwing a bunch overboard. But, this is where the metaphor gets a bit shaky. If we were fish, it would be a good thing to be thrown overboard to live another day in water. But in this metaphor, it is good to be caught. Through these parables, Jesus encourages us to make good choices in our life and trust in him. Except, Jesus is actually talking about people being thrown into the furnace of fire, “where there will be

weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This parable reminds us of the final judgment of God for which we should take heed.

Jesus wants us to understand God's truth, and that is not easily or quickly done. Learning about God's truth (in all its richness and diversity) is a lifelong process. Did you ever imagine that learning is also a way to serve God? Let your life be full of inquiry and let each step you take be a means of deepening your faith and love for God.

Let us pray:

God, it is wonderful to imagine the kingdom of heaven and all its wonders. Help us to make choices and trust you, so we might experience your joy. Amen.

The Rev. Kimball C. Arnold, Deacon
July 26, 2020