

Sermon: Can You See It?

Text: Luke 13:18-21

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Introduction: We certainly have an advantage over those early disciples who left everything to follow Jesus. At this point in Jesus' Galilean ministry there were some mixed and even contradictory ideas about the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. It is clear many did not understand - some within his own group, yet Jesus continues to teach in parables.

Our text today covers what are called "twin parables." They are both found in Matthew's gospel together. Mark only has the first one, and Luke removes them from Matthew's context of Jesus' teaching along the lake in **chapter 13** that is just full of parables.

I have to admit that I have struggled with this text because there have been a variety of approaches by other preachers and Bible teachers. Some have mistakenly treated this text as allegory which takes them down predetermined paths of prejudice. I heard what many would call "respected" bible teachers make statements which were not accurate or true even though they were said with conviction. I was so desperate I did a poll on Facebook to check the waters.

I believe that these two parables are metaphors, or maybe more technically, similes. Let me give you a definition of a metaphor: "a metaphor is a symbolic, direct comparison or representation that identifies one subject with another, thereby implicitly associating the attributes as well." - Robert Lowery, *Revelation's Rhapsody*, p. 212

I had originally thought I might title this sermon: "A Mixed Metaphor," but changed it at the last moment. This is an example of a *mixed metaphor*, a combination of images that do not work well together. "Keep your eye on the ball, your ear to the ground, your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel." Now try to do anything in that position. I think these two parables are trying to make the same point, not make Jesus' words too difficult to comprehend.

We have all had expectations of others, and Jesus is asking his followers: *Can You See It?* Do you understand what I am saying about the kingdom?

People have asked (questioned): how many points should a sermon have? The tongue-in-cheek answer, of course, is: well, at least one! There are those biblical interpreters that would say that parables have *only* one point. I tend to believe that is true more often than not. I will tell you what I believe that one point is later.

Also, because of the nature of parables, I am not always sure what I am looking at. “Smith, seated in a movie house, could not help being aware that the man sitting right in front of him had his arm around the neck of a rather large dog which sat in the seat next to him. The dog clearly was taking in the picture with understanding. He snarled at the villain, yelped happily at the funny remarks, and so on. Smith leaned forward and tapped the man in front of him on the shoulder. He whispered, ‘Pardon me, sir, but I can’t get over your dog’s behavior.’ The man turned and whispered back, ‘Frankly, it surprises me too. He hated the book.’” - William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, p. 119

Nonverbal cues are no easier. Have you ever seen a small baby turn up the corners of his mouth into what appeared to be a smile only to be told by someone who knows, like the mother, that it is only gas causing this facial response.

Let’s look at the text:

Luke 13:18-21 (NIV) ¹⁸Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.” ²⁰Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? ²¹It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Can You See It?

Especially early on, but really always, there has been a:

I. Hidden Nature to the Kingdom

A. Growth is expected.

When we are talking about a seed, we expect seed to grow. There certainly is good seed and bad seed, but if we are talking about what seed is *like* in the “kingdom of God,” we must be talking about its positive qualities. Seeds will literally almost grow by themselves. It is their nature to grow because of God’s design and help.

Mark 4:26-29 (NIV) ²⁶He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The kingdom of God, of which the *true* church is a part, works under these principles. Paul told the Corinthians: **I Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)** ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

So how is yeast (leaven) in these verses like the kingdom of God? Have you ever seen yeast introduced into dough? It also grows and grows until it finishes its work. Just like a seed, yeast is a living organism. Just like seed, given the right amount of water, heat, and time, yeast will make the best bread. You can almost smell it, can't you?

B. Function is expected

Seed will not only grow, it will reproduce itself. In our parable, it only requires some assistance from a man or a woman. The important character is not the person who plants. The final results of a tree (large shrub), or the place of safety and nesting for the birds depends on its nature given to it by God. Only the seed is the point of comparison and what eventually happens to it.

Scientists call this “biotic potential.” “Ecologists define it as the ‘inherent capacity of an organism or species to reproduce and survive.’” - Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 10

I sincerely believe these parables should *not* be interpreted like an allegory where everything means something different than what is stated. There is great danger in allegory...

The idea of yeast need not be forced to mean something negative here.

“It’s likely that man used yeast before the development of a written language. Hieroglyphics suggest that the ancient Egyptian civilizations were using yeast to leaven bread over 5,000 years ago. The biochemical process of fermentation that is responsible for these actions was not understood and undoubtedly looked upon by early man as a mysterious and even magical phenomenon.

Leaven, mentioned in the Bible, was a soft, dough-type medium kept from one bread baking session to another. A small portion of this dough was used to start or leaven each new lot of bread dough.(www.redstaryeast.com) So, it seems to me we are still talking about reproducing more bread just like a seed's function would be to reproduce more seed.

Anyone who has passed on a starter of *Friendship Bread* knows how this reproducing of a kindness as well as a tasty snack works.

Can You See It?

II. Hidden Timing to the Kingdom

A. Not immediate

Right after you plant a seed or add yeast to some bread dough, what do you expect?

Illus. When Eli was here last, he and I had a long talk about kindergarten and his life goals, and I asked him: when are you going to get a job and do something with your life?

In our culture there is a lot of impatience. In Jesus' time there were great expectations regarding the Messiah. The people thought there would be some powerful introduction of his presence into the world, appearing at the temple in Jerusalem. Messiah would create peace and prosperity. Everything would be put right. Roman occupation would end. The world would be perfect!

Matthew 4:17 (NIV) ¹⁷From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Yet even today, in one way, the kingdom is still coming and only partially fulfilled until Jesus returns.

B. It is a process.

Even Jesus' own disciples were wondering about *when*, even if through their mothers: **Matthew 20:20-21 (NIV)** ²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus *with her sons* and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

It takes maturation to be able to be fruitful or even useful. Jesus' disciples were no more ready to take positions of authority or be fruitful than Eli is ready to be governor of Michigan or take a wife and have children of his own.

Growth is a process that takes time and timing. What would happen if you pull up a month-old corn plant out of the ground to check its roots? You would have effectively killed it before it could grow and do what it was created for: produce more corn.

We need to grow to grow the church to grow the Kingdom, and we need God's help.

Can You See It? There is an:

III. Hidden Scope to the Kingdom

A. Goes from small to great

The King of kings was born in a manger. The Lord of lords grew up in Galilee, out of the limelight, not even formally educated. Jesus was poor, but was the Owner of everything. He was the Lamb of God, but also the Lion of Judah. Jesus said those who would humble themselves would be exalted and the last would be first. Jesus took a small, insignificant amount of food and fed thousands. Even though sometimes hidden from view our Savior is still doing great things through his people and for his people.

A lot of the story in these parables is about how the kingdom starts out small, but grows beyond natural expectations. The mustard seed is a very tiny seed yet it can produce a shrub or even a tree of 15-25 feet. Jesus later uses a mustard seed to describe the smallest of faith that can move mountains ([Luke 17:6](#)). It is about small beginnings turning into large endings.

The church before Pentecost was made up of about 120 disciples. Luke must have looked back at those early Palestinian beginnings and smiled. Then, the Church had covered all the Roman Empire. Today, the Church in its various expressions is something around 2.1 billion. That is a significant growth and change. The Church's influence and potential is beyond human understanding.

Just a small amount of yeast in a few handfuls of flour dough will grow and grow. And as the bread is baked, *it* continues to grow until it gives us one of my favorite things. From the text it is clear that the amount of meal/flour in the parable once it is leavened would feed over 100 people. And it started with something small that just one person had.

The scope of the kingdom:

B. Is not isolated

Seeds cannot be left on a shelf or yeast in its container on the table and expect it to do its job. Just like the metaphors of salt and light, there needs to be contact with the medium that is to be affected. Seeds need to be planted. Yeast must be added to the prepared dough before there can be a finished product. God's people cannot be isolated from the world (cloistered, monastic) in a way that there is no contact. It is the vocation of every Christian to affect others for the glory of God. When both seed and yeast are hidden in the material where they are placed, the results are amazing.

Conclusion: There is a lot of difference in how one might interpret this passage given some of the allegorical approaches. I believe Jeremias said it best: "Jesus is bold enough to employ both similes in the opposite sense. They apply--not to the powers of Evil, but to God's royal majesty." -*The Parables of Jesus*, p. 149

If Jesus can declare a Samaritan to be a good example and even the hero of one of his stories, he certainly can use other words in differing ways than what is expected to shock and get people to think.

The way Jesus came to earth, healed, taught, even bled and died and then returned to the Father after his resurrection was hidden from many. The Church has been commissioned to make sure everyone has an opportunity to see what we have seen. The Kingdom, while still hidden from some, is continuing until the time when Jesus returns when we will see Paul's words acted out:

Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV) ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It is sometimes easy to get discouraged because we do not see the end game clearly. Yet that is exactly why Jesus told these two parables to his followers, and why Luke shared them with the Church 40 years later. Craig Blomberg says, "Each (parable) does caution against a defeatism or siege mentality when Christian witness seems temporarily ineffective. One day God's causes will triumph." - (NAC), *Matthew*, p. 221