

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52—*A Seedy Situation*

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The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

³¹He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

³³He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

⁴⁴"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The Parable of the Net

⁴⁷"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," they replied.

⁵²He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

The members of this church are peculiar, a real oddity. You're unlike the members of other churches I've served. I don't know what made you this way—former ministers, the churches you came from, your general dispositions--but you're definitely different. Because you, unlike any other congregation I've ever encountered, are open to change. Since Pam, the interim minister before me, and then I have stood in your pulpit, you have considered changing your by-laws, changed the order of the worship service, changed the way we do communion, changed the Sunday School program, changed the adult education program, changed the membership tracking, changed our church administrators contracts to include sick days, changed the way we donate flowers during the summer worship services, and perhaps the biggest change of all—you've even painted the walls of the church office a different color than they had been. You may think that's no big feat, but in a church I used to serve the sr. minister's parsonage was being painted and the minister and his wife wanted the color of the shutters on the house changed from bright teal to off-white and the trustees said fine and that they'd be painted while the minister's family was on vacation and when they got home, the shutters had been painted—with a fresh coat of that bright teal paint. When asked why the shutters were still teal, the head of the trustees replied, "Well, we just weren't ready for that big of a change." It was ridiculous. The trustees, none of whom even lived in the neighborhood a mile from the church where the parsonage was located, couldn't deal with the change of a shutter color while, in the meantime, the parsonage looked like a stop on the popular children's game Candy Land. And, more importantly, the minister and his family felt dismissed by the Trustees every time they drove into their driveway and were greeted by those bright teal shutters they grew to despise. And all because a couple of folks couldn't deal with the idea of changing them.

You've probably had ministers tell you before that the last seven words of a dying church are, "But we've always done it this way." These are the words etched on the tombstones of so many congregations whose church buildings have been converted into health clubs, restaurants, and private homes. Churches that were once filled to the gills on Sunday mornings now echo the footsteps of the fifteen or twenty folks who show up for worship. As they gaze all around their nearly empty sanctuary, they talk about the way things used to be, how good it was back in the 50s, and how they need to hire a minister who can make their church like that again.

And yet, no minister can make a congregation change, just like no person can make their husband or wife change, no matter how much they wish for it to happen. A congregation's salvation lies not with whoever's standing up front, but in the ways in which God moves in the hearts, minds, and actions of the people in the pews. Thankfully, the kingdom of God does not rest on my shoulders, it does not rest on your shoulders, but rather the kingdom of God is held in God's own hand and is doled out to us in bits and pieces.

We learn something about the kingdom of God in this morning's gospel passage. Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed saying that though a mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, it grows into the largest of trees. This parable is often interpreted as a reassurance that no matter how small our faith, we still can accomplish great things. But, most scholars agree that Jesus was actually referencing the political realities of the kingdom of God more so than teaching us about personal piety. When Jesus says that the mustard seed grows into a tree, he is incorrect in a strictly botanical way because mustard doesn't grow on trees—it could be labeled a bush at best. But what a tree symbolized in Jesus' time was royalty, power, and dominion. Jesus' comments are prophecy about the future of God's kingdom in this world. Though other nations and powers may have been the biggest trees in the forest of power at that time, there would come a day when everything that had been the Roman Empire, or the Greek Empire, or the Byzantine Empire, or the Ming Dynasty, or whatever other powerful imperial nations you can remember from your school days—all of those would be nary a blip on the screen of history when compared to the immensity of God's kingdom on earth. Jesus is saying that life is about to change. That there's something stirring in the air. I picture him being a bit like the guys in the Jets and the Sharks in *Westside Story* when they sing, "There's something in the air, tonight . . ." A sense that something big is on the horizon and when the kingdom of God finally does arrive, life as we know will be drastically different.

Jesus also compares the kingdom of God to yeast that a baker adds to dough. Now I think of yeast as a rather benign thing, a good thing in fact if you, like me, have a sensitive septic system that needs a pack or two of the stuff added in for extra measure every once in a while. But in the time that Jesus was preaching, yeast had a negative connotation—it was a sign of corruption. But here, Jesus surprises the crowd and speaks of yeast in a positive way. He changes the meaning of the word. And the measurements he uses in his parable connote that the baker in his story was making a lot of bread—enough for 100-150 people. So not only does Jesus say that the kingdom of God is going to bring new meaning to old images, such as he has done with casting yeast in a positive role, but also that there will be plenty for all—an abundance and extravagance much like the abundance of bread prepared in this parable. That kind of abundance would have been shocking to Jesus' audience, it might be like telling us that a single person went into a kitchen with 20 pounds of flour to make some bread. Unless it's one of the folks working

at Stonehouse Bread, we would probably think that person with all the flour was a little crazy. And the same would have been thought of the character in the yeast parable—she was unexpected and surprising—as will the kingdom of God be unexpected and surprising. As one biblical commentator put it, “That one, lone woman working with that massive amount of flour has either lost her mind or is working for the kingdom bakery.”

But that’s not all Jesus has to say about the kingdom of God in this parable about the yeast. By using the example of yeast, he highlights the role of something unseen, something hidden, something that we don’t even know is there—until we let it set and rise for a while. Jesus is telling us that the purposes of the kingdom of God are hidden, but one day they will be made known just as yeast makes its presence known in the rising of the dough.

Jesus goes on with three more parables about the kingdom of God—but just these two about the mustard seed and the yeast have given us plenty to go on this morning. At first glance, they appear to be about the size of faith—that even a small amount of faith—like a mustard seed or a bit of yeast, can lead to great things. And that’s true. Because it only takes the smallest amount of faith to have hope and it only takes a glimmer of hope to have a vision, and it’s vision that inspires action.

But the true meanings of the parables go deeper. These are parables teaching us about the very nature of God—of what this world will be like when our prayer of—Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done—comes to full fruition. Do we really know what we’re asking for when, day after day, week after week, and year after year we repeat that plea? Do we have any idea the changes that are in store for us?

If the parables are to be trusted, and they surely are, we are asking for change. We are asking for surprise. We are asking for the unexpected. We are asking for our world to be turned on its ear.

This society in which we live is not so unlike the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived. We are blessed that we live in and are protected by one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful, nations in the world. Even when we disagree with its leaders or wish things were different, we surely are the beneficiaries of a powerhouse of a country. And so do we really want to live in a world where, as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, all are one? Are we really ready to follow Jesus’ command that if someone asks us for our jacket, we’re to give them our shirt as well? Perhaps we’d say yes today and enjoy having an excuse to take off a few layers in this heat and humidity, but would we feel the same way walking down St. Joseph Street in the blustery winds and snows of January? Are we really ready for the least among us—the oppressed, the poor, the imprisoned, the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, the children—are we really ready to hand over our power to them? As much as I’d like to say I’m ready, I know I’m not. I’m not ready for that kind of change. I want to keep lamenting where I’m going to store a new pair of shoes when, deep down in the most honest part of myself I know that there are children in this world, in our country, even in this town, who can’t afford a single pair of shoes, let alone an uncomfortable pair of heels that are purchased to wear with a single outfit and will probably only be worn ten or twelve times before I tire of them. Surely there’s a better way to spend my \$36.00, a way that’s more conducive to bringing about God’s kingdom.

There are huge changes that Jesus is predicting for us. I'm not ready for them. Are you? You've done so well with these changes of the past year, and I feel I've done well with the multiple changes that have occurred in the past year in my own life. But are we really ready for the big stuff?

I don't know. If we really believe these parables, we may think that we're in kind of a seedy situation. We say "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" but the whole time we may be crossing our fingers, secretly hoping that it won't be in our lifetimes because we're quite content with the way things are, thank you very much.

But, if it were to come tomorrow, seeing the benefits of change—as we have seen in this church over the past months—gives me more confidence that the changes God has in store for us will be okay. And in the two thousand years since Jesus preached these stories, we've seen bits and pieces of the kingdom of God. It's as if God is doling it out to us, bit by bit, so as not to overwhelm us. Each time justice overcomes oppression, love wins out over hate, and equality becomes more important than individual status—the kingdom of God is being doled out. When women were given the right to vote, a bit of the kingdom of heaven was doled out. When the civil rights amendment passed, a bit of the kingdom of heaven was doled out. When people are fed, sheltered, and educated, a bit of the kingdom of heaven is being doled out. And, if I may be so bold, when we recognize that our church administrators deserve a few sick days, we're doling out a bit of the kingdom of heaven. When we give money to buy a family in need a goat instead of buying expensive flowers to enjoy for an hour, a bit of the kingdom of heaven is being doled out. And little by little, change by change, surprise by surprise, we're getting there. God's kingdom is coming and, I trust that when it's here, we'll be more than ready for it if we keep changing bit by bit.