Sermon preached by

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“Thy Kingdom come …” We say it every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. But how can God’s Kingdom come in a place filled with cancer and drive-by shootings and hungry children and war that never seems to end. It is easier to imagine that the Kingdom is in heaven above us, someplace up there in the sky that we won’t see until we die.

“The Kingdom come …” Well, it may come at the end of the age, whatever that means, but right now? Can the Kingdom come and make a difference to *us* and change *our* lives? We are not much different from those who first heard Jesus’ words. They were living under Roman oppression; they had sick children and lost loves and financial worries, and Jesus came to tell them – and to tell us - the incredibly Good News that the Kingdom of God *is* dawning right here and now.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, said Jesus, like treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great price or maybe like the merchant who bought the pearl; the Kingdom of God is like a fishing net. Jesus’ images come rapid-fire. There’s no explanation. Jesus gives us these metaphors of the Kingdom one after the other like scenes glimpsed through the window of a fast moving train because Jesus doesn’t want us to get fixed on any one of them, because the Kingdom of God is larger and wider and bigger than any of them. It is not like any one of the illustrations, it is like all of them and more.

These parables are often heard as parables of success. The Kingdom of God is like a seed, like a handful of yeast, nothing much to look at, but when the seed is sown or the yeast mixed up with some flour, the results are astounding. They can seem to be stories about the power of small things. But there is different way to understand these parables.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, says Jesus. Now in the Hebrew Scriptures, the symbol of triumphant political power is the cedar of Lebanon not a mustard bush. “All the birds of the air make their nests in the cedar’s boughs,” says Ezekiel, “and in its shade all great nations live.” Jesus starts his story the same way. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, he says, “and the birds of the air make nests in its branches,” but the mustard is no majestic cedar. Mustard grows wild and is as substantial as a butterfly bush. Though its branches might hold nests, no self-respecting bird would build one there. It will never look like a cedar of Lebanon. The Kingdom of God will not tower over the forest or dominate the landscape. It is more like a scruffy weed that spreads like wildfire. Thy Kingdom come, O Lord, and grow wild and free and spread across this earth.

The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast, says Jesus, but in the Bible, yeast is a symbol of corruption. Israelites were forbidden to eat leavened bread, and leavened bread could not be used at worship because the yeast made a stink offering when it burned. As Paul says, “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven... but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

The woman in Jesus’ parable mixes yeast with three measures – about 180 pounds - of flour. So why is the Kingdom of heaven like a truckload of flour that some woman corrupts with a load of yeast? Jesus gave us a hint when he told the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes were going to heaven before them. In Jesus’ world the Pharisees judged everything either ritually clean or unclean, and Jesus came to proclaim a different message: that we are all ritually unclean, but that does not change God’s love for us. The Kingdom, said Jesus, was not going to be populated by saints, but by us sinners, sinners whom God loves enough to die for. The Kingdom of God is like – the Kingdom of God *right here* is like – the Eucharistic table where we sinners are fed with holy bread. Amazingly, the Kingdom is dawning here, today, when we break bread together.

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a poor man who becomes rich through good luck. The man didn’t earn his treasure; he just stubbed his toe on it and then covered it up again and went out to buy the field. He sold everything he had to buy that field. Now any Jew would know that Jesus was telling them a rich joke, because according to Jewish law, if you find a treasure in a field you bought, the treasure would belong to the original owner. So what is Jesus saying? That you can’t buy the Kingdom of God even of you spend every penny you have. We can live in it, we can enjoy it, but it belongs to God. It is a free gift, as long as we keep our hands open, but when we close them up and try own everything we can get our hands on, God will never be able to put anything more into them.

Again, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a precious pearl that is bought at great sacrifice. The pearl merchant was not devious; he just used his professional skills to find value. What‘s wrong with that? Here’s the catch. In his lust for a possession, the merchant spent all that he had to buy the pearl – so he had nothing left to live on. The Kingdom of God is not something we can own. Free grace, not free enterprise brings in the Kingdom, here, today.

Life in God’s Kingdom, according to this Gospel, is one in which everyone is gathered up into God’s net and sorted out. If the Kingdom of God is like this, then it is not something that we find but something that finds us and gathers us in.

Five times Jesus tells us that the Kingdom is right here, right now, so small as to be almost unseen, but big enough to change our lives. Jesus spins our heads around to show us that the Kingdom is not a distant heaven where we earn a chair in the first harp section if we are good, but a hidden and powerful reality in our midst. Five times Jesus tells us that if we are looking for pearly gates, we are going to be disappointed, that if we are looking in lofty places, we are not going to find very much. Jesus tells us that God has resorted to the oldest trick in the world: hiding something in plain view, in the ordinary places of our ordinary lives. The Kingdom is among you, he says, the extraordinary mixed right up with the ordinary. You can see signs of it whenever you see love and mercy, whenever the sun warms the earth, whenever a baby is born, whenever we stop worrying about our rights and what we can get, whenever we trust God to care for St. Mark’s in this time between Rectors, whenever we do what is right and rejoice over what we can give. Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom IS coming, Jesus says, and once we stop being greedy, we will see signs of it dawning.

Last week my husband and I saw *Dunkirk*, the new movie about the evacuation of 400,000 French and English troops from the beach where they were surrounded by the German enemy. The film was loud with sounds of bombs and the cries of injured men. The men were lined up on the beach awaiting rescue, but the troop ships and destroyers that came for them were few in number and many were sunk and their hulks blocked the beach. Hope faded. Hope faded until a few small craft appeared on the horizon, little boats from every town on England’s coast, fishing boats, pleasure craft, lifeboats and tugboats, each one doing its part. In the first day, they evacuated about 7,000 men; after a week, they had evacuated more than 340,000. The rescue, the Kingdom, didn’t come in a massive military coup; it came when everyone reached out and helped. It came when people put their own safety aside to help where they were needed. It cam when each person’s small effort combined to make a mighty enterprise, the greatest rescue of all time.

Thy Kingdom come, O Lord; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Can it be so at St, Mark’s? Can each one of you be part of the dawning of God’s kingdom here? Could you offer to teach church school or to serve on the Altar Guild, could you invite a friend to church or assist in the nursery? Could you take Holy Communion to a shut-in? Could you increase your pledge? Could you bring altar flowers from your garden ? God’s Kingdom is coming, says Jesus; together we can open the way.