

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

Title: The .075 Principle

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Roger Allen Nelson

Please join me in prayer:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.
Amen.*

For those who grew up in the church this prayer is like settling into a familiar comfortable chair ~ with the recognition that this is what religion is supposed to feel like. It easily falls from our lips.

We easily recite its remembered rhythms.

We easily find our place in the company of bowed heads.

We easily join in the haunting murmured sound.

But, I wonder if its familiarity makes space for imagination. Does it spark wonder? What do you dream or envision when you pray? As those who are busy, bored, grateful, cynical, longing, worried, jaded, and comfortable... What do you imagine when you pray:

Thy kingdom come...

Thy kingdom come... Well, certainly there would be no child left behind and a roof over every head and a chicken in every pot ~ unless you imagine a vegetarian kingdom and then maybe tofu on every table. There would be liberty and justice for all,

and last tears would be wiped away,
and cancer would be eradicated,
and depression would be a faint memory,
and every horror and every abuse and every hatred would be over,
and every genocide and every expression of slavery would be history,
and all that is broken would be healed,
and God's *shalom* would reign.

When pricked we can easily imagine the coming of "thy kingdom."

But, when Jesus imagined the kingdom he didn't use grandiose imagery or paint pictures with some sweeping splendor. Instead, when imaging the kingdom Jesus said it would be like a mustard seed, or yeast in a lump of dough, or a man digging in a field, or ...

He stacks up images of everyday people doing everyday work: a farmer, a housewife, a fieldworker, a merchant, a fisherman...

And in their everyday moments he hides, or he places, or he uncovers images of the kingdom. He gives hints. The coming kingdom is told in parables or pictures.

Well, dear friends, I invite you this morning ~ even for just a few moments ~ to reconnoiter your imagination of the kingdom.

When Jesus says that the kingdom is like the miniature mustard seed that grows to be a fine shrub or a tree he was subverting the norm.

He certainly was taking a storytellers license ~ there are smaller seeds, but the mustard seed was common, proverbial, and small.

He certainly was exercising hyperbole ~ the bush is something of a common weed. I read of guidelines that excluded it from gardens and at its absolute tallest it was all of 12 feet.

So, it could be that Jesus said this with a little twinkle in his eye because he was playing with popular socio-religious imagery. For, example the prophet Daniel said that the Babylonian kingdom was like a majestic tree standing at the center of creation. In his words:

The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beast of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

Now that sounds like a kingdom! The massive cedars of Lebanon or the towering sequoias of northern California or even a big sturdy oak in the Midwest, those would be the trees of a kingdom that was impressive, imposing, inspiring...

But, according to Jesus the kingdom is like a small seed that grows up to be a mediocre bushy weedy thing that provides space for birds to nest.

Maybe we are not supposed to pick at and pull apart parables. Maybe their beauty is in their telling and the layers of familiar tradition and comfort they provide. Or, maybe David Garland is right, when he writes:

Jesus' parable hints that the kingdom is breaking into this world in a disarming, and for many, a disenchanting form. We do not sing, "A mighty mustard bush is our God." The parable implies that the kingdom will not come as "a mighty cedar astride the lofty mountain height" reaching to the topmost part of the sky but as a lowly mustard bush.

There must be something else going on here.
Well ~ what if the point is the proportion?

The average mustard seed is less than .075 inches in diameter. Later in Matthew Jesus says that with faith of that size you can move mountains. So, the parable could be Jesus encouraging his followers ~ an unimpressive, rag-tag, back-woods, motley-crew ~ that from their small humble beginnings comes a kingdom that will change the cosmos.

Call it the .075 principle. Don't judge a book, or a person, or a movement, or a god by the cover. You never know what power, or potential, or purpose, or prosperity is buried there. From something tiny comes something cosmic.

From something common comes something profound.

From something ordinary comes something magnificent.

From something dead comes something life giving.

So, be encouraged! Have faith! No matter how insignificant, tossed aside, or trampled under you may feel ~ you carry the seeds of the kingdom and God wants to do something creation changing with you!

The .075 Principle. That will be title of my new book, and coffee mugs, and seminars, and t-shirts, and lanyards, and DVD series, and.....

And it is too easy and not fair to poke fun at that kind of reading of this text. For, there is some principle of growth and it gives people hope. Don't denigrate the small seed of the kingdom for it will yield a great fruit and birds will have a nest and children will have shade, and there will be bread, and treasure, and pearls, and fish, and....

But, is there anything else?

Greg Mortenson, the son of Lutheran missionaries, grew up in Africa where he learned to love people and adventure. When he was 11 he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and as an adult, in 1993, Mortenson was part of an expedition to climb K2 – the second highest mountain in the world, a difficult and dangerous Himalayan high peak.

Things went horribly wrong on the climb. Mortenson never made it to the top and when coming back down he got separated from his friends and porter. Wandering alone, lost, sick, having lost thirty pounds, and exhausted unto death, he remembers singing a song he learned as a child, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Don't let the humor in that pass: an American, lost in Pakistan, singing a German hymn, in Swahili.

Mortenson ended up in an isolated mountain village in northern Pakistan. The people there took him in, nursed him back to health, and with kindness and hospitality helped him find his way.

During his stay Mortenson saw the village children waiting for the part time school teacher that they shared with another village. They met outside for class, they scratched out their lessons with sticks in the dirt.....

And he was so moved by what he experienced that almost before he knew what he was saying Mortenson promised to come back and build a school. Fifteen years later his work has established 58 schools that have educated over 24,000 kids.

There is here an amazing story of a small seed that grew into a substantial shrub that saves children. But, Mortenson says the seed was the tea that the village chief drank with him. The chief said:

Here we drink three cups of tea to do business; the first one you are a stranger, the second you become a friend, the third, you join our family and for our family we are prepared to do anything ~ even die.

Dear friends, what if the kingdom is sown in the ordinary moments of drinking tea or making bread or planting a garden or teaching a child? Barbara Brown Taylor says that it is

the holiness hidden in the dullest of our days.

Could it be that Jesus was reminding his followers that the kingdom comes in commonness, in hiddenness, in unexpectedness. The point is not that it grows into a giant tree, the point is that the kingdom is present in even these common seeds. That even in the beauty and banality of creation, the kingdom is active, alive, growing....

For, the kingdom is a son who gently and faithfully tends to his sick mother,
the kingdom is forgiveness offered without retribution,
the kingdom is tending to the cultivation and joy of a garden,
the kingdom is hospitality to the outsider,
the kingdom is the time and tenderness of listening to a spouse,
the kingdom is teaching that wiggly child that learns slow and won't sit still,
the kingdom is extravagant mercy shown to the one most difficult,
the kingdom is the recovering alcoholic who keeps going back to AA more for the others than for herself,
the kingdom is....

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

...man, women, field, seed, bird, air, yeast, bread... The Kingdom of heaven is like these things; the kingdom is found in these things. These are the places to dig for the kingdom of heaven; these are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, their treasure is the only one worth having.

After worship today you are invited to stay around for some conversation about needs and directions for this little congregation. Who knows where that conversation will lead or if there will be any change or if any bushes will grow....

But, I know that our deepest imagination is that gospel seeds will be planted in all these little tykes who come up and go out to Children in Worship and who knows

how those seeds will grow. And..... and maybe there are new partnerships were we can come alongside others in love and service and maybe seeds will be planted in us and them. Who knows?

The point is not the power or the proportion or even the prosperity.
The point is that this is the kingdom that Jesus bequeathed to us ~
the kingdom that we pray for,
the kingdom that is subversive and surprising,
the kingdom in which live out the will of God,
the kingdom that is around, among, and even in us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.