

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

The Kingdom You No Longer Like

Matthew 13:31 – 33

Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, October 13, 2019

Introduction: Unexpected Hospitality

In 2004, a 19 year old young man who lived right next door to us asked me if he could live in our house. He said he wanted to enroll at Roxbury Community College, and said to me, “Do you have any extra room in your house? I think it would be good for me to live with you all.” I struggled with that a little bit. Because I thought that he and another young man had stolen from us four years prior. Someone had left the bathroom window open so it must have been someone who had come in, and deliberately left it open. That narrowed it down. And, this young man had been to juvie lock-up twice, had gotten kicked off the high school basketball team for using drugs, and had generally not been interested in relationship with us. But last year, this young man cleaned up his act, and recognized that a better living situation would help him. I said, “But Lord, I think he’s one of the kids who robbed our house!!!” But Jesus said, “I have a great deal of love for him, and I’d like to love him through you.” So my wife and I invited him to live in one room in our house.

Relevance

Kingdom Hospitality. It’s rooted in Jesus. There’s a little phrase, ‘in Christ,’ that happens all throughout the New Testament. It reflects the hospitality of Jesus, because he opens up himself to others. By his Spirit we are drawn into Jesus. But hospitality works the other way, too. ‘Christ in you,’ is another phrase all throughout the New Testament. Jesus wants us to be hospitable to him, by his Spirit. He comes to live in us, spiritually, to be our king. That means, we open our lives to others, because he opened his life to us. And we go get involved in other people’s lives because Jesus got involved in ours. Kingdom hospitality goes both ways.

But it is challenging. Because at one point or another, Jesus loves someone that you would rather not. It doesn’t always look like having someone in your house. There are other ways. It’s that workmate, or that classmate, or that neighbor. But for sure, Jesus wants to reveal his kingdom through us, and invite more and more people into it.

Text and Context

So there are times where it is important to say to people that because of their own choices, they are making themselves into people who will not like Jesus or his kingdom. When you get angry, did you know that it has an impact on our brains? We have a fight or flight response. And sometimes that’s appropriate. But when we don’t calm down and work it out or forgive, and especially if we cultivate bitterness and unforgiveness in our own hearts, and especially, *especially*, if we don’t seek therapy for trauma, we damage the decision-making part of our brains. The cortisol and other chemicals damage our brains. Then, if we make a bad choice, what else kicks in? Pride. We get defensive. ‘No, I was right, and I was completely justified to punch you in the neck.’ Decisions become patterns. Patterns become habits. Habits become character. And character becomes destiny. So we have to interrupt the sin pattern. How did Jesus do that? A lot of ways. We are going to look in the Gospel of Matthew to see one particular way.

We’ve been in this series on the parables of Jesus called Good Soil, and now Good Seed. And we’ve been getting a sense for Jesus’ vision for his kingdom and his vision for how he would transform us. He told these stories because the Jewish people did not have the same vision, largely. We see that in the setting of the two parables I’m going to cover today, in Matthew 13:31 – 33. The context here is that Jesus has started his movement, which he calls ‘the kingdom of God.’ He’s gathered disciples, he’s training them to gather more and teach them what he taught. The Jewish leadership of the time was feeling really challenged. And we pick up the story at Matthew 13:31.

The Guests You Don't Want: v.31 – 32

In Matthew, Jesus is staying at a house, and goes in and out of the house. His movement reflects who is an insider and an outsider to his kingdom movement. So what Jesus does is warns these people that they are making choices to make themselves into people who will not like the actual kingdom of God that they say they want. They won't like it because they want to monopolize it, but the kingdom is not just for them. He says this by telling two parables. The first one is in v.31: ^{13:31} He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; ³² and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

Now doesn't this sound all nice? We've read about Jesus telling parables like this before. A seed falls into the soil, and grows. Great! And yes, that is the first parable in this sequence of seven parables in Matthew 13. Or, in another place, Jesus says, 'If you have faith like a mustard seed,' you could do this or that by faith (Luke 17:5; Matthew 17:20). And yes, that is true, too. But the way Jesus throws the mustard seed element into this whole other setting makes it different. This story would have been a complete shock to Jesus' audience, because the picture he is painting here does not make sense. You wouldn't do this. You wouldn't want this. Why?

First of all, you would not put a mustard seed in your own garden. Mustard was considered a weed. This is a picture of what mustard looks like [SLIDE]. It's a wild and unruly plant, like dandelion. Yes, you can make dandelion tea, but you have to be careful where you grow the dandelion, and how you manage it. Because it's a weed. You don't want it in your garden. You want it in a field, far, far away from your garden.

Second, mustard was considered to be an unholy plant. Mustard plants were considered unruly and therefore, they were unholy. And it's against Jewish law to mix the holy and the unholy. So again, you could use it but you'd separate it from your garden.

Third, you do not want birds in your own garden! Who wants birds in your garden? They eat your food. Why do you grow a garden? To let the birds eat the fruit? No! You want to keep the birds out, so you can enjoy the fruit. Look at this SLIDE: 'How to keep birds out of your garden!' Because you don't want bird poop everywhere, like on this car [SLIDE]. Isn't that awful!?

What's even more significant is that the phrase 'the birds of the air nested in its branches' represent foreigners. It's a quote from Ezekiel [SLIDE]. Ezekiel pictured the kingdom of Assyria growing and growing until it became an empire, and the birds of the air nested in its branches (Ezk.31:6). Meaning, all kinds of people were drawn into it. By quoting this, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God would grow and grow until it became like an empire, and Gentiles would come to nest in its branches! Yikes!!! And it will feel like you are hosting unwelcome guests. Unwanted guests. When are these birds going to leave my garden and leave me in peace?!?

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God feels to you like other people - strangers, really - dropping in on your stuff and eating your food and using your resources. It's like something you don't want. But it's not the kingdom of God that is messed up. You're messed up.

Illus: There are times where it is important to say to people that because of their own choices, they are making themselves into people who will not like Jesus or his kingdom. Now is one of those times. Ever since the Charlottesville, Virginia white supremacist rally in August 2017, white supremacist groups and white supremacist violence have been front and center. The day after that rally, two years ago, I preached a message from these two same parables. Some of those folks think they can follow Jesus and be white supremacist. They are wrong.

Illus: In that message, I told this story. In 1966, a Catholic believer named Senator Robert F. Kennedy went to South Africa to speak out against Apartheid. At the University of Cape Town, he gave his famous 'Ripple of Hope' speech. In response, some white South African students complained about slavery supposedly being in the Bible, therefore Apartheid was supposedly okay. Neither of which was actually true. RFK said, 'Well, just think about this: What if you die and you go up to heaven; and suppose when you get there you enter the pearly gates; and

suppose God is black.’ There was silence. Those students had nothing to say. Because they had believed in cultural Christianity, and therefore their culture and not Christ.

Jesus wanted people who would reflect his own hospitality. So if you think your wages and your possessions are just for you, no! Everything comes from God, including this creation, our skills, and whatever health we have. So we participate in His generosity. He welcomes people, of all backgrounds. When God stepped into human nature in Jesus, He was claiming everyone’s human nature, and declaring His solidarity with every person. That’s why He gives everyone an opportunity to repent and receive the teaching of Jesus. That’s why following Jesus is not a liberal idea or a conservative idea. It’s God’s idea.

So ultimately, the question is always, ‘Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?’ And for all of us who would be his followers, we have to ask, ‘Are we welcoming people in the ways that he would?’ Yes, there are times when we will feel like Jesus is using ‘our resources’ to feed people we didn’t want to feed. To reach out to people for their good. But Jesus is saying, ‘I am the King of this kingdom of God. And this is my table, not yours. This is my party, not yours. This is my family, not yours.’

The Bread You Don’t Want: v.33

Jesus knows the kingdom won’t be what these folks expect. So he tells the second parable: ³³ He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”

Now again, it’s easy to read this as a happy story. We think, ‘I know what this means – the kingdom of God starts small, and then it gets into everything, and it affects everything! And aren’t we all happy about that?’ But then you read this Scripture in its cultural context. This didn’t make people happy.

First, what is leaven? Leaven – or yeast – is the stuff that makes bread rise. In Jewish life, leaven was used as a symbol of pride. Because it puffs up. It’s what makes the difference between flat bread like matza, and leavened bread like what you find at Panera’s [SLIDE]. Leaven is what you get out of your house during Passover and Yom Kippur and other holy days. On many occasions, certainly the most important occasions, you wanted to make flat bread with no yeast.

Second, why is this woman working with sixty pounds of flour? What is sixty pounds of flour? It looks like this [SLIDE]. What do you do with sixty pounds of flour? Maybe you use it gradually, but more likely you bake bread for a big feast, like a wedding. You entertain a lot of guests at once. In fact, in Genesis 18, Sarah and Abraham take sixty pounds of flour – the only other place in Scripture that appears – and entertain God and two angels. So Jesus is alluding to one of the most holy meals in the Bible, but he throws in the surprise plot twist. This doesn’t feel holy! It’s as if Jesus said, ‘A woman took turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce, and ‘hid’ baking soda inside everything.’ You’d be asking, ‘Wait, is that the meal I think it is? And... baking soda???’

Third, you don’t ‘hide’ leaven in flour. You can hide money in your underwear drawer because you can pull that money out again. You can’t pull yeast out of flour. Do you ‘hide’ baking soda in flour? No. And, someone will find out pretty quickly, as soon as they start baking, what was ‘hidden’ in there.

The kingdom of God is like this??? It’s when you expect holy bread, but surprise, you get not holy bread. In Acts 10, God tells Simon Peter to go to the house of Cornelius the Roman centurion, and receive his hospitality. Simon Peter at first says ‘no’ because Jews thought eating with Gentiles made you unclean. But God says, ‘Go anyway. Eating with him doesn’t make you unclean.’

The Jewish leaders at the time defined cleanness and holiness as primarily social because it was about whether you followed the kosher laws. Jesus said that the kosher laws are no longer binding. So he defined cleanness and holiness as spiritual, through attachment to God, having the love of God, acting out of the love of God. This means he went to the houses of ‘sinners’ and ate with them, like Zaccheus the tax collector in Luke 19:1 – 10. He hung out with the ‘wrong people.’

The first parable, of the mustard tree in the garden, was about giving hospitality to the 'wrong people.' The second parable, of the yeast in the flour, is about receiving hospitality from the 'wrong people.'

Illus: When I was 23 years old, my mom disowned me because I lived in an apartment complex with Mexican immigrant families. I was receiving the hospitality of the 'wrong people,' in her view. I helped to lead worship for a Spanish speaking Bible study which was led by my mentors Jose and Jennifer Espinosa. And I moved into an apartment complex that was really run down. It had 100 units. Ninety-nine of those units had Mexican immigrants. One of those units had me. They were working a lot of low wage jobs. I was working at Intel in Silicon Valley. And I was welcomed in by them. They invited me to their tables. A couple of families virtually adopted me as one of their own. But when my mom visited me, she said I was wasting my education, even though I was using my degree at work. She ordered me to move out. I refused until we could talk again face to face. So she disowned me. We later repaired our relationship, and that's a longer story. But the important thing here is that she thought I was living with the 'wrong people.' She didn't know Jesus, and still doesn't, so to her, it was wrong to invest so deeply in these Mexican immigrants. But Jesus' vision of his kingdom doesn't change. And the reason I was willing to challenge her was because Jesus would challenge her.

So let me back up to ask a bigger picture question. In secular America today, we say we value tolerance. Then, we run into people who are intolerant, like these white supremacists. And in a secular mentality, the secular liberal person feels caught in a bind. Do I have to tolerate an intolerant person? Jesus does not have that problem. He just calls that person to repent. And so should we.

God has always trained His people to embrace others who are different, others who we fear, others who we need to reconcile with. There is the old story in the book of Genesis about Jacob wrestling with God in the dark of night. And as dawn breaks, God sees the face of God. Then, Jacob continues on his journey home. And he meets his brother Esau, the brother he stole from many years ago. He had been wrestling with God's call to confess and reconcile with his brother. He thought his brother would be his enemy. So the wrestling with God the night before was a physical representation of the internal wrestling he was doing. But when Jacob meets his brother Esau, he says, 'Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God' (Genesis 33:10). Jacob had just seen the face of God early that morning when the sun came up. Is it possible that God appeared to Jacob wearing the face of Esau? Does God wear the face of the person you wronged? Or the person you fear? Or the person you need to apologize to? The person you need to be reconciled with?

That's what is going on here in these two short parables in Matthew. Jesus knows when our hearts have become too small. And that's why, when that happens, he reminds us that his kingdom is big. Sometimes, he does that in gentle ways. Sometimes, he does that in jarring ways, like in these two parables. But the kingdom itself doesn't change. Jesus' love for all humanity doesn't change. The question is: How do you and I experience the kingdom? Or Jesus' love for all? Well, that depends on you. It depends on your posture.

And so, as we the people of Christ continue to live in the aftermath of colonialism and empire, where 'race' was invented to create hierarchies of power, the message is the same as it's always been: Christ loves every single person. And that's good news. Unless you don't like it.