

## I. Intro:

As I was studying for this sermon, I was reading from a book called Lydia's Impatient Sisters, by feminist theologian Luise Schottroff. I studied it because I knew Schottroff had a section examining the Parable of the Leaven, from Luke 13:20. She noted that the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are traditionally paired together because they provide a contrast.

Typically the parable of the mustard seed is interpreted to depict men's work (sowing and harvesting) while the parable of the leaven shows women's work (baking sourdough bread). While there is some truth that these stereotypes do play out in the parables, Schottroff also points out that Jesus is actually defying gender stereotypes here. This is because he elevates women's work and places bread baking as an illustration of the kingdom of God, on the same level as men's work of planting and harvesting.

### **A. I'm telling you all this because reading this immediately made me wonder about finding some parallels for today.**

1. I began searching for any illustrations that I might bring from home life. I was hoping to demonstrate how both Janette & I have common activities we do that help us understand God's kingdom.
2. Quickly I thought of the obvious link:
  - a) Janette's a good bread baker. I said, "Yes! That'll work!"
  - b) Then I thought of how we also have backyard gardens, where small seeds produce big plants. For example this year I couldn't believe how a castor bean in just 5 months produced a 10-foot tall plant with huge leaves! I was excited about these Kingdom of God illustrations UNTIL ...
3. I remembered that those lovely gardens are also Janette's work. I can claim almost zero credit for the gardens or for bread baking in our household.

### **B. So much for using my home life to demonstrate both men's and women's domestic efforts as metaphors for the kingdom of God! Maybe Janette should be preaching this sermon, not me!**

1. And if this line of biblical interpretation sounds like an example of a man trying to explain a woman's reality, which he knows very little about ... well that wouldn't be the first time in history, would it?
2. (Do you remember 6 weeks ago when I used pregnancy as an Advent metaphor for the reality of waiting for Xmas??)

Luise Schottroff, Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity, ©1995 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 85

## II. So instead of forced illustrations, let's talk about our text

**A. Jesus begins by asking an open-ended Q: "What is the kingdom of God like?"** So our 2 parables today are partial answers to that Q

1. More than anything else, what the 4 Gospels tell us Jesus' ministry was about, is in this simple phrase: the kingdom of God.

- a) That's how Jesus identified what He was doing – teaching & preaching that the kingdom of God had now come.
- b) So if Jesus' whole ministry was to make the kingdom of God plain to people, this opening Q is very appropriate (*repeat*)



2. Author and pastor Brian McLaren has wrestled a lot with that very question, except he's not merely interested in what Jesus meant by the Q 2K years ago

- a) In essence, McLaren is trying to find a relevant contemporary faith for us today, so he asks that same question of his 21<sup>st</sup> C readers: "*What is the kingdom of God like?*"
- b) I think it's a fair question for us today as well. If I gave a title to this sermon today, it would be "*What is the kingdom of God like?*" This message from God that Jesus came to preach – What's it look like?
- c) Here we 1<sup>st</sup> take notice of HOW Jesus communicated God's message

## **B. In responding to His own Q, Jesus used that supremely evocative teaching method called the parable**

1. You know, Jesus almost never gave simple or straight answers to questions he was asked.

He was always making people scratch their heads & wonder what he was talking about: Mustard seeds? Wheat infested by weeds?

2. And when Jesus asked other people the big questions, the ones that would get to the heart of his message (like the title question today) it also wasn't simple

- a) The God-reality Jesus was describing was old yet it was new. It was weird, unorthodox, and even offensive. It was so multi-sided that it couldn't be captured in only one way. A single answer to this central Q

was inadequate.

b) That's why He told so many parables ... that's why He gave us many ways to fill in the blank when He said "The kingdom of heaven is like ..."



### III. **With more than one way to fill in that blank, perhaps there's more than 1 way to even ask the question Jesus asked**

**A. One thing I appreciate about Brian McLaren's writings is that he always wants the Gospel to be real, and for people today to make sense of it and engage with it**

1. So I strongly resonated with McLaren's book The Secret Message of Jesus, when he notes that the language of "kingdom of God" doesn't work very well anymore in our culture.

a) For those of us raised in church, we've probably heard about the "kingdom of God" for a long time. But really, outside of "churchy talk" who talks about kings and kingdoms in our daily lives?

b) For 1 thing, McLaren says that kingdom language sounds outdated to our ears. Kings are a thing of the past. Real earthly authority today lies with legislatures & governors & prime ministers.

c) Secondly, McLaren rightly says that the language of kingdoms brings negative associations today with patriarchy & imperialism & domination.

(1) We resist the idea of all-powerful kings telling us what to do!

(2) The closest thing we have to kings today are military dictators. I don't think that image works for the message of Jesus!

2. There was nothing wrong with Jesus using the language of "kingdom of God" in His day because kings are what they had and what they expected.

a) It was a culturally and politically appropriate reference for his time.

(Brian McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus, ©2006 W Publishing Group, p. 138-40)

b) But we need different language today ... better ways to communicate the transforming message of Jesus Christ for our culture

**B. So as a way to both answer and reframe the title question here are some alternatives that Brian McLaren has offered, to help us describe what Jesus is about**

1. Review several alternates

a) The dream of God ...

(1) gets at the vision God had from the very beginning & still has

(2) helps draw us to the heart of God, the wishes of God, the ultimate will of God

b) A particularly timely new metaphor: The network of God.

(1) God invites people into a life-giving network, to be plugged in, connected intimately to God and also to other humans and all of creation, where there is mutual give and take.

(2) Some have also used the word "community of God" here, or "ecosystem of God".

c) The mission of God

(1) (missio Dei) is actually a phrase that's been in use for a few decades in some Mennonite churches.

(2) Participating in the kingdom of God is essentially aligning ourselves with God's mission in the world

d) The party of God

(1) Imagine an amazingly loving and extravagant God who wants nothing more than to celebrate w/ us and invite us to God's feast!

(2) The party of God is wonderfully illustrated by the party thrown by the long-suffering father for a son who doesn't deserve it, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son

e) The revolution of God is one I'm specially drawn to

(1) The very language is startling and provocative to us, which is what Jesus intended when he knew his own kingship claims would be seen as a direct threat to Caesar

(2) This one helps us see, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr did, that following Jesus as Lord also means we call on divine power to nonviolently oppose evil & injustice in the world.

f) For you artsy, more expressive folks, you might appreciate Jesus bringing about the dance of God

(1) For centuries, the difficult concept of the Holy Trinity has been described as a dance of mutual indwelling of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit ... where they are separate yet inseparable

(2) There's a lovely old Shaker tune that's given us a musical setting for this metaphor, in Sidney Carter's hymn "Lord of the Dance", about the resurrected Jesus (*start singing refrain*)

g) One more recent metaphor from McLaren: the movement of the Spirit

(1) Younger adults today are often skeptical of institutions and structured causes, but they're drawn to spiritual or political movements

(2) In fact, what God has been about throughout history has been exactly the movement of the Spirit, which cannot be captured by only one church or one denomination or even one religion

2. Important we realize, none of these is the perfect metaphor, and none will work forever. 25 or 30 years from now, we'll have to find other ways to translate "kingdom language" of Jesus for the times.

<https://brianmclaren.net/q-r-alternative-metaphors-for-kingdom-of-god/>

**C. I've offered us some new language options to ask and think about the question Jesus asked ... but what was Jesus getting at with these images of a mustard seed and leaven?**

1. I'll try to make this interpretation brief because in the end, what you understand about these parables of Jesus matters much less than how you enter into them!

2. Action and obedience are much more important outcomes from these words today than simply increased knowledge.

#### **IV. So briefly, what meaning can we draw from the mustard seed and the yeast as images of the revolution of God?**

**A. It's not only writers from the last 25 years who shed new light on the Scriptures.**

1. I often find good New Testament material in the Daily Study Bible Series, a classic commentary by Scottish Bible professor and author William Barclay, even though the volumes were written in the 1950s

2. For these 2 parables in Luke, Barclay helped me understand the importance of the last phrase in v. 19 about the birds nesting in the branches of the big mustard tree

a) In the Ancient Near East, empires were often represented as large mighty trees, where their subject peoples could find protection, much like birds nesting in the branches

b) For a biblical example, turn with me in your Bibles to Ezekiel 31:1-6

(1) Here God addresses mighty Egypt, critiquing this tree image of

the Assyrian empire, in light of how Assyria would later fall to Babylonia. Listen for the "birds in the branches" language

(2) *Read Ezek. 31:1-3, 5-6*

c) So Luke the parable writer is using language of birds nesting in the branches, which his readers would have recognized as referring to the power and protection of an empire

(1) In other words, Luke has a vision of the expansive kingdom of God ... Christ's "empire" if you like: In this grand kingdom all people and nations will come together for shelter

(2) The implication is that in God's kingdom there is room for a wide variety of beliefs and experiences and ways of worshipping.

(William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke [The Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed]*, ©1975 Westminster Press, p 178-80)

(3) That surprising mustard tree of God can handle the nest-building "birds", from German Mennonites, and Filipino Catholics and Latino Pentecostals to African-Initiated Churches

## **B. Now in the parable of the leaven, it's common to pay attention to the disproportionate effect of a small amount of yeast leavening a huge batch of dough**

1. Although emphasis often goes on the yeast being hidden, Barclay also helped me interpret the yeast as not unseen, but rather as something that is in fact visible and undeniable

2. In the parable, the woman is handling something that is powerful, maybe even dangerous ... so the yeast stands for the disturbing and revolutionary power of the Christian message! (Barclay, p. 180-82)

**C. What I hear these parables giving us today is a vision of God's grand spiritual movement, spreading like a benevolent empire to protect and draw in all peoples & nations ... a great network that is both life-giving and at the same time dangerous and subversive for the powers that oppose God**

## **V. And after all this you may rightly ask, "so what?" I wouldn't blame you for asking.**

**A. Remember I said that action & obedience from these parables is more important than increased knowledge?**

1. WMC is not exactly known as a revolutionary place that scares away casual Xians, but maybe it will be!

2. If it's the Revolution of God, it's going to change you! If you're helping make God's dream a reality, the world around you is going to

take notice! Other individuals and systems are going to be affected!

**3. What might God's mustard seed ... God's yeast look like as lived out by Waterford people on the ground? We might have people ...**

- a) Making a difference in school kids' lives through after school mentoring or participating in the Goshen Middle School E3 program
- b) Helping out in person at Interfaith Hospitality Network, interacting with local residents who are currently homeless
- c) Volunteering with the Safety Networks to assist vulnerable local immigrants with transportation or other ways of meeting basic needs
- d) Taking part in the Poor People's Campaign
- e) Getting to know their neighbors and helping them, even when it's not convenient

**B. I've occasionally mentioned I participate in a conversation and friendship group of black and white Christian men in Elkhart**

1. The group takes its name, Seeking the Beloved Community, from a dream of the late Dr. MLK Jr. In truth I consider this group a living image or a foretaste of the Dream of God

2. I met with this group yesterday and I was once again deeply inspired and challenged as we talked about making disciples of Jesus and about making a difference locally

a) God gives us the power as baptized believers to make an impact on our communities!

(1) Testifying to and extending God's never-ending reckless love to others is not an optional part of being a Christian!

(2) Even if "evangelical" is not your natural identity or your primary spiritual stream, your call as a Xian is to pass on what you've received, not to just quietly soak in it!

b) God wants to reconcile our broken relationships: with ourselves, with God, with others and with all of creation.

(1) That gift of holistic salvation draws us into this strangely beautiful kingdom of God ... this revolution, this network, this dream, this movement of the Spirit

(2) Last week the Parables group from Goshen College sang a lively version of "When the Spirit of the Lord moves in my soul, like David the shepherd I sing". Is the "Movement of the Spirit" moving you?

**C. Yesterday I was once again inspired by my African-American**

**brothers and sisters** who don't hesitate to name Jesus and tell the reason for the hope that they have (as it says in 1 Peter 3:15)

1. They show me that God's movement is already here and it can't be held back!

a) God has already assured us the evil one will not have the last word in history. God's dream is being realized, beyond what we see on the news and hear from Washington.

b) God's revolution will inevitably undermine the principalities and powers of this world!

c) God's party has already started, and God's dance music has been playing!

2. Are you feeling the rhythm, or are you sitting on your hands awkwardly at the edge of the metaphorical dance floor, as I literally did at my own high school dances?

## VI. Conclusion

**A. Yesterday's gathering in Elkhart was a strong exhortation for us Christians to be a light on the hill and to engage somehow with our local communities outside of our churches.**

1. It's easy for me to internally distance myself from the enthusiastic and sometimes fiery words of other Christians who look and talk and grew up so differently from me

2. But the most powerful words of the morning for me came from Pastor Jon Brown, of Church Without Walls:

a) Jon's been in our Conference and around us reserved white Mennonites long enough to earn the right to speak forthrightly.

b) I've certainly heard Jon preach with high energy, but this time he spoke to us white Mennonites in a soft, loving and earnest appeal.

c) His message was simple to us whose heritage is as "the quiet in the land": DO SOMETHING!

d) He was basically saying, "Even if it's not a big step, take Jesus outside the walls, and reach out somewhere, somehow! We all have our spheres of influence. How are we using them?"

3. Coming back from the Beloved Community gathering I remembered there is a particular "mustard seed" action I've been intending to do for almost a year now:

a) I've been meaning to sign up online with Safety Networks to help provide transportation for immigrant neighbors who can't legally drive.

b) But somehow it was easier to stay uncommitted and not make my life more complicated, getting involved with people different from me

c) My time with the Beloved Community convicted me enough that yesterday I actually did sign up to help with the Transportation Network. I invite you to ask me in a month or two how that commitment is going.

**B. Brothers and sisters, the mustard tree is already growing big and the leaven is doing its powerful work! The question I leave with you is ...**

1. How will you join the Revolution of God?
2. What will this Movement of the Spirit move you to do?

**C. May the Movement of the Spirit move us indeed!**