

Sermon Title: *The Kingdom of God is...*

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53**

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup>it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

<sup>44</sup> ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup>on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ <sup>52</sup>And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ <sup>53</sup>When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

For Reflection:

The central theme in the ministry and teaching of Jesus is the kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven. This idea ties Jesus’ entire message together. The “kingdom of God” permeates all of Jesus’ ministry, giving it unusual coherence and clarity. It is the core, the very essence of his ministry.

-Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*

The kingdom of God is not based on what works for achieving our self-interest, but based on the character of God.

-Will Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*

Jesus talks more about the Kingdom of God, or as the gospel of Matthew calls it, “the kingdom of Heaven,” than anything else, and yet, most of us would be hard pressed to explain what exactly this concept means, what exactly it is. Jesus rarely speaks plainly about the kingdom of God, but instead uses metaphor and parable – sometimes his kingdom parables make us feel warm and comfortable, like the small but mighty mustard seed – sometimes the kingdom parables are jarring, like the ‘first shall be last, and the last first’, or the parable of a rich man who ends up in Hades while poor Lazarus whom he ignored all his earthly life lives with Abraham in eternity.

So in parable – veiled and not so veiled, comforting and jarring – doing what a good preacher should do, leaving his audience (leaving us) to do most of the hard work of drawing conclusions and connections for ourselves. Jesus never said, “okay, let me plainly define for you the Kingdom of God”, for perhaps that would leave us feeling like, we have it, that we can possess it. But, the kingdom of God is not a concept to be grasped or possessed, but a life to lived – a vision to caught-up in.

And so we have parables, five parables this morning which give us five flashes of the Kingdom – snapshots, like scenes glimpsed through the windows of a fast moving train – leaving us to pieces the flashes together into a larger portrait.

**‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup>it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’**

Those of you who LOVE mustard, might be upset to learn that mustard seed was not viewed positively in Jesus’ world. *Mustard was a weed, dreaded by farmers* the way today’s gardeners dread crabgrass or bindweed – or those who want perfectly manicured lawns dread dandelions. It starts out small, but before long has taken over your field. It was something small you wanted to take care of before it had taken over and ruined the whole crop.<sup>1</sup>

A couple of years ago when I was home in Nebraska, Jolene, one of our oldest family friends was over for dinner. Jolene was, and still is, part of the church where I grew-up – when I was a child she was often in charge of the Christmas pageant. And on that visit she told me that when I was in one of those shows, just coming into my own, I apparently sang quite loudly and off-key. And one of the parents, after hearing one of the rehearsals, came up to Jolene afterward and said, “you know, that Marc, he doesn’t have quite the voice that his brother does. Maybe you should tell him that he needs to sing more quietly.”

And Jolene told this person that she was not going to do that, nor were they allowed to tell me that either. She was not going to squash any love I might have for music or make me feel self-conscious about my singing, even if it might make for a much better performance.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose’s article, “Parables that do things.” <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-7a-parables-that-do-things/>

Now, while my singing certainly is nothing extraordinary – I do love music, as Jenna can tell you, I sing often and still quiet loudly. I loved being in choirs and, like many of you, have a strong connection between my faith and music. And I think about how much that could have changed if Jolene would have been more worried about that performance than my childhood feelings. I think about how, in that church as a kid I never felt anything but loved and valued, which is a big part of why I became a pastor – and I wonder how much that might have changed if Jolene might have plucked that little mustard seed from her field – how much might my view of the church and my own place of welcome and belovedness in the church have been different if she would have listened to that advice and thought that the kingdom of God is about perfection and performance.

And so, perhaps the kingdom of God is in all of us, tall and small, young and old – each person a mustard seed, of which we can nurture or squash – water or weed.

**<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’**

The kingdom of God, is perhaps like a catalyst in a culture that wants to maintain the status quo.

“If a person is well adjusted in a sick society”, says Matthew scholar Warren Carter, “then corrupting is the only path to wholeness.”<sup>2</sup>

Or, as Dr. King put it, “there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted.... I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to

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<sup>2</sup> From Gary Peluso-Verdend’s article in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3.

segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, King said that we have a need for a new organization in our world. *The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment*--men and women who will be as maladjusted in our society of militarism, capitalism, and racism. Who in the midst of the injustices of our day will cry out with the words of the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Through such maladjustment, I believe that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of humanity's inhumanity into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

The kingdom of God is a catalyst for justice, for reconciliation, for truth-telling, for love, for kindness. Being a catalyst means stirring things up, causing a reaction so that things might never be the same -- so that growth can happen.

**<sup>44</sup> 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'**

Of course, some of Jesus' kingdom parables have economic connections and implications -- *kingdom economics*, some have called it. Economics that don't always seem to make complete

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<sup>3</sup> These selections come from Dr. King's speech at Western Michigan University (Dec 18th, 1963). <http://thepossibilitypractice.com/martin-luther-king-jr-on-creative-maladjustment/>

sense, like a merchant who puts himself out of business for one pearl or someone who trades in all their savings and security to take a chance on one treasure.

I have been struggling with kingdom economics, of wanting to take more of a plunge toward how I think God wants me to use my money and yet, that feeling of need for security, of holding onto what is ours, it keeps holding me back. I can say that being generous has not gotten easier with making more money, as I always assumed it would when I was younger. With some of our savings Jenna and I have talked a lot the past year about buying a small duplex – instead of having it in investments of stocks and bonds – trying to buy a small place where we could invite a few people from Corpus we know to live at a very reduced rent. Thinking, that perhaps this way our money could be helping a person or two (while hopefully appreciating over time), rather than just making wealthy people wealthier in the stock market.

And I love the idea. I think it fits with our values of who we want to be in the world. I think it is at least closer to kingdom economics, in a sort of capitalist way (if that can be possible). And yet, as we have gotten closer to moving in that direction, there is always thoughts holding me back: prices seem really inflated right now in Boise, what if this is a bad time to buy, what if things really dip soon. What if we get into a new war or our government does something else crazy and our economy goes in the tank again? What if we have someone in there that is a terrible tenant that trash the place...

And so I keep putting it off. But in kingdom economics, are these the questions I should be most worried about? What makes me so fearful of releasing this bit of security? It is just as likely that this could be a great investment – not just an idea that matches our values or moves us

deeper into relationship with others...but it is the fears that keep holding me back – keeps me uncertain about whether it is treasure in that field or just a rock.

**<sup>45</sup> ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup>on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.**

A merchant, who after a career of searching, finds something that makes everything else he has been doing seem trivial by comparison.

Renowned preacher and theology professor Fred Craddock tells this story, swearing that this actually happened to him (which will make more sense after you hear it):<sup>4</sup>

He was visiting in a home of one of his former students after graduation, and after a great dinner, the young parents excused themselves and hustled the kids off to bed, leaving Fred in the living room with the family pet – a large, sleek greyhound. Earlier in the evening Fred had watched the kids roll on the floor playing with the family dog.

"That's a full-blooded greyhound there," the father of the kids had told Fred. "He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids, that greyhound."

Now, as Fred sat alone with the dog, the dog turned to Fred and asked, "Is this your first visit to Connecticut?"

"No," Fred answered. "I went to school up here a long time ago."

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<sup>4</sup> This story comes from Will Willimon's sermon, "Go for the Gold", [http://day1.org/948-go\\_for\\_the\\_gold](http://day1.org/948-go_for_the_gold)

"Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami," said the greyhound.

"Oh, yeah, you retired?" Fred said.

"Retied? Is that what they told you? No, no, I didn't retire. I tell you, I spent 10 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 10 years of running around that track day after day, with others chasing that rabbit. **Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good look at that rabbit. It was a fake! I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! I didn't retire; I quit!"**

When we discover the kingdom of God, or when it discovers us – when we see just a glimpse of it, when we taste just sample of it, when we smell just a whiff of it floating on the breeze – it makes us realize that much of what we had been spending our lives chasing, was ultimately fake and unfulfilling.

And so, may the kingdom of God disrupt and disturb us – may it help us reorder our priorities and pursuits, that we might live as kingdom people – that through us, others might too catch a glimpse of what we have seen. Amen.

[Sending Blessing](#)

*And now as you go from this place, may the Spirit of God go with you – being disturbed and disrupted by God's kingdom; causing us to reorder our priorities and pursuits – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

*Go in peace. Amen.*