

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

July 27, 2008

Don't Miss This!

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 8:31b-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The kingdom of heaven is like a bush! It's a nice big bush where birds settle and nest, but it's still just a shrub. No doubt Jesus winks when he tells this parable, and perhaps the crowd even chuckle the first time they hear such a completely unexpected image as a description of God's kingdom.

There are many Christians who take the Bible seriously. Too seriously. They seem to miss out on the playfulness that is often on its pages, the humor, and the love. That does not mean there aren't serious things going on in Scripture. Jesus, for his part, is never slow to confront his self-righteous, self-interested opponents. He laments the state of his people who have been misled by corrupt leaders. He anticipates hard trials to come, even as he issues a cry for repentance and the kind of serious and sustained changes that will lead us all to wholeness. But, those deprecations and laments and cries of anguish are not the final word of Scripture. There is the "hallelujah" of an Easter morning and the confident hope of a spirit-formed church which bursts into laughter and song after the world offers up its very worst. The world is filled with deep and deadly seriousness, but that does not mean we have to be, too.

For sure, Jesus is not either. He brings healing and hope, consolation and laughter, to those who can hear his words and heed them. Unfortunately, across the boundaries of several languages, the humor of Jesus is easily lost. We know, for instance, that while Jesus, along with his fellow Jews in first-century Palestine, spoke a dialect of Aramaic, his words were primarily

written down in Greek, the language of scholarship and commerce in his day. That means that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were already translating what Jesus said, in order to bring his message to a wider audience. We, of course, read those same words in English. It's notoriously difficult to translate a joke from one language to another, much less across two languages.

Then, there is the distance of many centuries which makes it even harder to discern whether in a given moment Jesus is speaking with a wink, a nod, and a gentle smile or with a furrowed brow and a frown of disappointment. And let's face it: what was riotously funny only a few decades ago may pass by us without even a snicker. How much more that is true for the humor of 2000 years ago. I recently read that in the ancient Roman world, lettuce was considered very funny. There were lots of lettuce jokes back in the day.

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/books/review/Grimes-t.html?ref=books>]

Of course, an ancient Roman might have trouble understanding why we would dress up a chimpanzee in a business suit.

Though scholars from Sigmund Freud to modern neurobiologists have never been able to unravel the mysteries of why we laugh, it's easy enough to see what keeps us from laughing: deep pain or sadness or a tragic view of life or a rigid and fixed view of the world that will not admit any new possibilities. Jesus wants to relieve us of all these things. He wants us to see our world, our lives, our God in some new and wonderful ways.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs.” Some wild exaggeration tips us off that Jesus does not expect to be taken literally. The mustard seed is small, but it is not the smallest seed. Jesus knows that, and so do his hearers. And, the mustard seed does not grow into the greatest of shrubs. It's a little bush, and nothing more.

However, the whole parable is intended to tweak our imagination and confound our preconceptions. Jesus could have used a completely different image. “The kingdom of heaven is like a towering oak in the middle of the forest!” No matter what he would have said next, his audience would already have nodded off before he finished. “Oh yes, kingdom . . . big thing . . . towering over other things . . . mighty . . . powerful . . . we’ve already heard about that before.”

Instead, Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a little mustard seed.” That would shake up any audience.

“A what? What is so great about a mustard seed? More to the point, what is so great about a mustard bush?” The kingdom is great, but it comes in a completely unexpected form.

Indeed, there is an interesting theme that runs through a series of parables. It stresses the inauspicious beginnings of the kingdom. Like a seed, it is small, even tiny. There is not much to see. It is easy to miss. But it grows, quietly, unobserved, sending its roots deep until its branches grow high.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast . . .” Jesus continues. Again, it is very small, but the quantity of flour is large. Very large. Preposterously large. This lady is making enough bread to feed an army. “Three measures of flour” is the amount Jesus states. One measure equals fifty pounds. Add the water and fat and let it rise, and you’d easily have three hundred pounds of dough. You’d need a very large surface to knead that much dough, and an even larger woman. Jesus’ hearers would have laughed out loud.

But, the kingdom is like the yeast, and that is not a flattering comparison. In the time of Jesus, yeast is most commonly used as a symbol of corruption. “The yeast of the Pharisees” is a term we find on the lips of Jesus himself. After all, yeast is a form of fungus. In beer making or bread baking, it eats the sugar and lets out gas. Not a very pretty picture. Yet, therein lies the

kingdom, working inexorably to transform a lifeless lump of dough into something delicious and nourishing, fragrant for the nose and sweet to the tongue. Slowly, gradually, the yeast does its work, in secret, too. It is hidden, unobserved until the whole loaf has been changed.

A third parable. A treasure hidden in a field. Again, it is unobserved, underneath, out of sight. It's easy to miss, and most people have missed it until one day someone finds it. We don't know who the person is. We don't know he or she is doing in that field. We can't untangle the morality of the action they take next, re-hiding the treasure and concealing its existence from the owner.

At a minimum, these parables should reshape our ideas about where and the kingdom is happening, how God's activity in the world can be quite subtle, occurring in the most unexpected places, and among the most forgotten people. And they teach us to pay attention. Don't miss this, small though it may seem.

A gesture of kindness in a moment of conflict. A willingness to trust when there is risk involved. A daily commitment to the well-being of another. A sip of water offered to a thirsty person. A meal given to a hungry stranger. An encouraging word. A heartfelt prayer. A parent's promise to raise their child to know Christ, and a congregation's promise to support them.

Small things, each and every one, but that is how the kingdom grows.

The problem is that in our world, we look only for the big things. The louder, the larger, the flashier, the more entertaining they are, the more likely we are to pay attention. I believe that we've reached the saturation point, though. Everything, it seems, is loud, large, and flashy. That makes it very hard to sustain a conversation about the things that matter the most—in our families, in our community, in our church. The normal ways of communicating don't work so well anymore.

That means that if you and I desire to be faithful, we need to tune out some of the noise around us. And pay attention to the little things. To be on the lookout for what is gentle and kind and filled with beauty through and through. To hear what's quiet, to see what's been hidden, to know what is modest yet wonderful, meek but filled with the power of God. The treasure is right under your nose.

You may bump into it by accident, or you may come to it by searching. When you find it, do not let it go! Like a treasure in a field. Like a pearl of surpassing value! It is what we will give anything to possess. It is what we will give everything to have.

It is what Jesus would die for, but in the meantime, he could make his hearers laugh, because he knew he was offering them the one thing worth living for . . . now and forever.

Thanks be to God.