

Sermon
Proper 12, Year A
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by The Rev. Norman Bray

Come Holy Spirit come. Come like the wind and cleanse, come like the fire and burn. Create and consecrate our hearts for our great good and your great glory. Amen

In the past fourteen months I have preached many sermons from this pulpit, many more than I ever imagined preaching in my life in fact. Since I hope to preach for many years to come in this same pulpit I thought that it might be helpful to me and possibly to you, to look back at what I have said to you and see if any one thing stands out, if there is any subject that I return to time and again. As it turns out, there are two, the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven, they are two ways of saying the same thing you know), and Stewardship. I do not think that I started out to make these two themes more prominent than any other but on the other hand, these are pretty good topics to work with and they are very closely related, but today's gospel is more emphatic than any that I have ever encountered. Kingdom of Heaven was my only choice this week but you can be sure that Stewardship is coming soon.

I told my wife that when I first read this week's gospel I felt like a twelve year old Little League baseball player standing at the plate with my bat on my shoulder while on the pitchers mound was a major league pitcher with a bucket of baseballs at his feet. And then that pitcher began throwing those fastballs right by me. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed" strike one. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast" strike two. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field," strike three. "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;" strike four. The kingdom of heaven is like a net" strike five. "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." Strike six. Two outs and I never even got the bat off of my shoulder. All of these images coming at me so fast, without any explanation, it is almost too much. If you add in the parables from the last two Sunday's gospels we are looking at six parables about the Kingdom of Heaven and there is very little explanation. What are we supposed to make of this? What kind of a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven are we supposed to end up with after juggling all of these metaphors? And then at the end Jesus asks his disciples "Have you understood all this?" and they answer "yes." I may be struck down for saying this but I think that somebody is lying. Some apostle is not telling the truth because he does not want anyone to think that he is slow but the truth is that none of them really understood. I know that because in Matthew **20:21** the mother of James and John asks Jesus for a favor. She says "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, ***in your kingdom.***" In your kingdom. They do not have a clue.

What about us, do we have any idea what the Kingdom of Heaven is supposed to look like? What picture pops into your mind when I say "kingdom?" I know that the disciples had a very clear idea of "kingdom" because they were subjects of the Roman Empire. They knew that the emperor was in Rome and that everyone owed some sort of allegiance to him. Under him were the governors of the provinces, minor kings like Herod or officials like Pontius Pilate, and all around them were they soldiers, daily reminders that someone else someone far away was actually controlling their lives. There were tax collectors to remind them that they owed more than allegiance to the emperor. The people of first century Palestine had a very clear idea what a kingdom looked like because they were part of one, they were in one all of the time. But what about us? What do you think about when you try to imagine a kingdom? Do you think of England, with the Queen as titular head of the government but Parliament having the actual power? Do you think of tiny countries like Monaco or Lichtenstein, so small as to be quaint reminders of a way of life that really does not work well in this world anymore? It really is very difficult for us to relate to this kingdom idea because we have no reference for it, we are too far away from any kingdom to be aware of what it might mean.

Since we are not really doing well with that whole kingdom concept, let's try and tease out some meaning from what we are given in today's gospel and see if that is any help. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;" most of us are familiar with this story and if you have ever seen mustard grow it seems like a silly story. My grandfathers pastures used to have wild mustard growing in them and that never got over four feet tall and you surely couldn't even call it a shrub, much less a tree. I have read of wild mustard in California that grows over eight feet tall so let's allow that, 8 feet, but it still is not a shrub, just a tall stringy plant. Cows won't even eat it. Given that these are the facts, then what was Jesus getting at? Why would he say something that was so wildly improbable? It is exactly that wild improbability that is the point. Everyone knew that mustard was not a tree, but in this parable it becomes the greatest of all shrubs, it even becomes a tree, a home for the birds to nest in. In the world that was all around them this was impossible but in the Kingdom of Heaven the smallest, the most insignificant seed becomes huge and it becomes important because it becomes a home for the birds. It might help you to know here that in the Old Testament, the birds of the air are frequently used to refer to the Gentiles, to us. So in this parable the least significant seed, a bunch of raggedy Jews following a strange teacher all around Palestine, becomes the Christian Church, home to much of the worlds population, and this happens without any emperor, without any armies, without any human ruling over all of us from some far off place.

What about that woman who mixed in a little yeast with three measures of flour until it was all leavened, what is that about? If you have ever done any baking you know how little yeast it takes to make bread rise. When I make bread I usually let it rise twice, punching it down after it has doubled in size and the on the third rise it goes into the oven, but I only bake two loaves at a time. This woman in the story has three measures of flour. That is enough to feed 150 people. What would you do with that much flour, rising, rising, rising? It staggers the imagination, but what is interesting about yeast is that you cannot see it work. You can see the effect but you never see the yeast after it is mixed in to the flour and that is they way that Christianity is supposed to work, quietly, but with explosive results. Yeast is subversive, working undercover and behind the scenes to change everything that it touches, just the way that we are to change everyone that we touch by our words and by our example. Not by threatening people with promises of hellfire and damnation if they do not change their ways but with quiet words of love and support and with the example of a Godly life. That is subversive, that is radical, and that is a threat to the empire.

Do we have enough to work with now, can we picture the Kingdom of Heaven base on the two parables that we have looked at? We have an impossibly large weed and a woman with a houseful of bread dough that is growing out of control. Is that really not very helpful? Maybe not. Try this then, try to form an image of the Kingdom of Heaven from these images: **Matthew 5:3-11** Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Are you beginning to get the picture now? This is the Kingdom that Jesus is the rule of and this is the kingdom to which we are heirs. This is what the world looks like when power does not come from the might of governments but from the love of God and love of neighbor. This is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, a kingdom where every human being gets enough to eat every day, where every human being receives healthcare, not just those that can afford it, where power is not used to oppress but to raise up every one of the Children of God. This is a kingdom that does not make any sense to the powers and principalities of this world because in this kingdom all are served, all are loved, and all are truly valued as Children of God. This is no peaceable kingdom; this is a radical Kingdom, a Kingdom that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. This is the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen