

“What is the Reign of Heaven Like?”
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We have another group of parables from Jesus this Sunday. We’ve heard them before. The interesting thing about parables is that we can always hear new things. First the farming story about the mustard plant. Mustard is small when first planted and then is large when it grows. Matthew has Jesus exaggerate the growth. Mustard does not become a tree. Even a town kid knows this. So we usually hear this story as a story about explosive growth. This is a good way to interpret this story and yet it misses something. When this story was told by Jesus in the first century there were two different styles of farming. The way the gentiles farmed and the ways the Jews did farming. It was easy to tell the difference between a gentile farm and a Jewish farm.

I grew up in Minnesota and we would often drive over to Wisconsin to visit relatives or just for a days outing. This area of Wisconsin had been settled by both Norwegian farmers and Belgium farmers. Local people could easily tell the difference between a Norwegian farm and a Belgium farm. The Norwegians built white farm houses. They were built usually a ways away from the road down a separate road the led to the barn and then the house. Belgian farmers built houses out of distinctive yellow brick that they remembered from back home. The always built their home close or right on the main road with the barns out in back of the house. Locals had conflicting reasons for why these practices had taken hold. But it was a sure thing to tell a Norwegian farm house from a Belgian farm house.

It was the same thing in the first century Palestine. Jews didn’t plant mustard in their fields, not in the first century any way. Mustard is a widely proliferate plant. It grows anywhere and spreads like wildfire. For Jews mustard was a metaphor for a lack of restraint. Jews used mustard in their cooking, but they didn’t plant it in their fields. Living a good Jewish life meant witnessing to the stable and orderly love of God in all things. Planting a weed that was a symbol for wild disorder was judged to be an unnecessary compromise of the basic principles of a Jewish life. Gentiles on the other hand were happy to plant mustard and seed to everyone who would buy.

So what could Jesus be saying? He was speaking to his Jewish neighbors that would never plant a mustard seed. Is he saying that the rule of God is like a sign and source of disorder and chaos that disrupts the community’s ability to witness to God’s love? How can that be; what does that mean?

Maybe another of the parables will enlighten us. Let’s look at the parable of the unleavened bread. Leaven is not red star yeast that we have in our cupboards for that rare occasion when we decide to bake something from scratch. In the first century Leaven is a piece of bread that was placed in a warm dark moist place until it changed from bread into something that would cause bread to rise. Well when I put bread in a warm moist place and let it sit there, I have mold. The power of mold is a great mystery to us. Penicillin grows from mold. It is life changing. However, we can get sick from mold as

well. Periodically, very periodically I clean my refrigerator and throw out all the bits and pieces of things that have been moldering away from some length of time. So some part of the mold is yeast and causes bread to rise. It is a mystery to me. Leaven is also the substance that is thrown away before Jewish Passover when someone is cleaning and purifying their homes before the celebration. Both Paul and Jesus refer to leaven as a contaminating influence that ought to be avoided. The rabbi's refer to leaven this way "a little leaven leavens the whole lump. They meant the same way as that old cliché; a rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.

What's going on here? The rule of heaven is like a bit of chaos that prevents us from witnessing to God's love or the rule of heaven is like the bad apple, a source of corruption. Jesus tells strange stories.

Jesus tells two parables here that are sure to offend his audience of good Jews. He tells them that domino of God, the kingdom of God, will defeat good observance of the Torah. He is telling his audience stories that make it impossible to celebrate Passover in the usual way. If an observant Jew in the first century listens to Jesus tells these parables they could understandably be angry. Jesus doesn't sound like the Savior of the world. In this scene, he sounds like an immature disrupter.

I want to change courses a bit here. I was in Vietnam for all of 1969. I was stationed with the Red Cross at a field hospital. I spent a whole year working with severely wounded and dying people. Mostly very young GIs, but we also had a Red Cross girl who was wounded and died at our hospital. It was an extremely intense year. We worked hard. We partied hard. We played wild practical jokes on each other. We did anything to relieve the tension. It was life lived on the edge. I remember that I could walk into the small hospital officers club and order a drink. It was not unusual for someone else male or female to come by and sit down on the bar stool next to me. Very often an intense conversation regarding life and death, beliefs about God, morals, and ethics ensued. After maybe an hour of very personal intense conversation, somebody would have to leave and that might very well be the end of the relationship. I would never see that person again. It just seemed like during that year all conversations had meaning, all chance encounters had the possibility of being intense transformative meetings. Some of the encounters were with dying and wounded patients, some of the encounters were with fellow medical people, and a conversation could be with a doctor a nurse, someone from the motor pool or someone from the kitchen staff. It didn't matter; life was short, and everything you did was filled with possibility for meaning.

After my tour of duty my nurse friends and I all went to work in military hospitals in Germany. Although we didn't speak about it, life was so different in a civilian environment. Life felt flat. All those intense meaningful conversations were over. People were involved in their own lives and had their own problems. It took me a good year to begin to relax and not expect so much out of everyday encounters with others.

I don't have any answers to the questions I asked earlier of Jesus' parables. All I know is that when I see Jesus in these scenes he acts a lot like someone who has just left

a year of living in an intense combat zone. Everywhere he looks people are a bit too flat and comfortable with their lives. Nobody looks passionately committed to anything. Remember Jesus has already run into violence and danger in his life. When he was born, Herod was out slaughtering innocent children and his parents had to leave their home quickly as immigrants to Egypt. His words had so angered a crowd in Capernaum that he had to quickly make an exit to save his life. Jesus knows his words and actions anger people. He is intelligent. He knows his cousin John died the death of a traitor. He is certainly aware that he is on a similar path. Jesus, the man of peace, has a deep and probably intuitive understanding of the very real danger of violence. He may have jumped at sudden loud noises. His eyes may have carefully surveyed the room before he sat down. His may shift suddenly sometimes or focus a little too intently on individuals when he was talking to them.

I don't imagine that Jesus very often told nice comforting little stories. His stories had a sharp edge to them. Wake up! The kingdom of God may not be what you think it is. The rule of God may bring chaos. The dominion of God may not be happy family celebrations. Wake up, stay alert, and don't suppose the kingdom of God promises you a nice comfy life. You don't know what the rule of God will bring, but if you bring your passion and hear and understand these stories, then you will have the thrilling experience of seeing the whole salvation of the world before your eyes. Whoever surrenders their will to God's rule, whoever leads their whole existence according to the dominion of God, then they will experience and know the salvation of all peoples.