

Snapshots of the Kingdom by Emmett Floyd
Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-46
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, July 27, 2008

This is a political season as we're all aware. Probably, all of us sometimes grow a little tired of the political advertisements, comments, speeches and all the rest. One of my favorite stories out of the political realm comes from the former Senator Nancy Kassebaum, who was a senator from Kansas. Her father was Al Landon who ran for president against Roosevelt in 1936. Landon remained a very staunch Republican all of his life. In his later years he grew very hard of seeing and very hard of hearing. (I'm sure none of us who are getting older are aware of these ailments, but some people do have them.) He and his family were members of a little Episcopal church in a town in Kansas. One day, the church got a new Rector. Nancy took him by to meet her father and she said, "Father I want you to meet our new Rector."

Her father thought she said "Democrat," and he replied, "I don't want to talk to any democrat."

Nancy said, "No, no father, you don't understand, he's a son of a bishop."

And Landon replied, "Yeah, they all are."

Our passage today reminds us of a very different kingdom—not the kingdom of this world, but the kingdom of God. These first two little short parables illustrate how God's power works in the world. God's power does not come with pomp and circumstance. The Jews of his day were used to the Romans demonstrating power. Whenever Pontius Pilate came to sit on his judgment throne he came with Roman legions, flags flying, and with trumpets blowing, following the example of his emperor back in Rome, who used every opportunity to demonstrate to the world his power. The kingdom of God is different. The kingdom of God comes silently, slowly, not seen by much of the world.

The first parable about the mustard seed indicates how God's power works in such a way. Unseen, it blossoms into a full-fruited tree. It is so big, it can no longer be classified as a bush. Jesus says it becomes a tree big enough that birds can come and lodge in its branches. This is the way God's kingdom works. We strain at appearance. We like show. We demonstrate in every way that we can, our power and our presence in the world.

God works differently. It is a silent working. It is a seed hidden in the ground that grows up. It is leaven put into three bushels of flour, and that was an extravagant amount. This is in contrast with the Jewish law, which separated everyone. Jews took pride in being different from the people around them. They were people of the law, while all of these others paid no attention to God's law. Jesus says God's power and God's grace work everywhere. It is not separate. It is a part of life.

The kingdom is not coming in some future day when we die. Jesus says the kingdom is with us now, growing secretly. God's power infects every human enterprise. There is no part of our lives that is separate from God's concern and God's love. Because it works silently and mysteriously, it is so easy for us not to see it. We are enamored by the things of the world. What makes a show? What looks good? What drives good? What makes us stand out in a crowd, by the way we dress, by what we have, or what not? God's kingdom is not so. It works in the heart, in the inner person, in ways that are not always understood or even perceived, but it is there. It is working.

Fred Craddock says that he was once on an airplane and he fell into conversation with an operating room nurse. She said,

You know we did an experiment in our hospital. We decided that in the operating room we would always talk in negative terms. We would fuss at one another and we would say bad things to each other to see if it had any effect. When we did, the patients became depressed and took longer to recuperate. On another day we would be cheerful and make positive comments toward one another and be uplifting in our conversations. The people in the operation room that day recuperated more quickly. They had a more positive attitude when they came out of surgery. Even though they were unconscious, they were absorbing the spirit around them.”

Craddock said,

I’m glad you told me that story because I’m a preacher. It looks to me, a lot of times when I’m preaching, people are half asleep, and I wonder if they hear anything. I need to remember that later on in the week, they may get a Christian twitch. They won’t know where it came from, but I’ll know.

God works silently like this. He gives hope because even when we cannot see it, we know that God is at work.

Imagine you were John, the disciple, listening to this passage. Could you ever imagine that one day, in a land that you never heard of, in a city that was yet to be built hundreds of years in the future, in New York City, in the United States of America, there would be a great cathedral that towered over the businesses around, named Saint John the Divine Cathedral? If you had been John, could you have ever imagined that such a day would come? But it did come, because God’s power and spirit were at work.

We go to the next two little parables, both of them, also, very short. The first one is about a man who is digging in a field. It’s not his field. He’s probably a farmhand, and he comes across a hidden treasure. He is joyful to find this treasure, but it is not his because this is another man’s field. What does he do? He goes and sells everything that he has and buys that field in order to possess that treasure.

Another man, a jewelry merchant, was always on the search for fine pearls. One day, he came across a pearl of great value. He knew how valuable this pearl was, so he sold everything that he owned in order to have enough money to purchase this pearl of great value.

What is Jesus telling us in these two sets of parables that are juxtaposed to one another? The one truth in the first two parables is that God’s power is unstoppable. God’s grace and love will prevail in this world. Paradoxically, the last two parables give a different message. God’s kingdom comes because we work for it. I’m reminded of Martin Luther’s word that we ought to pray as if everything depended upon God, but we ought to work as if everything depended upon us. This is the paradox of the kingdom. We are totally dependent upon God’s, grace, love, and power, but at the same time God calls us to work to make the kingdom a reality in our daily lives. It is not either/or, it is both/and, and we are called to serve the kingdom, to live by the kingdom, to share the kingdom, and to be kingdom people, in order that God’s love may be released more fully.

The first man came upon the treasure accidentally. Doesn’t that sometimes happen to us? We are not expecting something to happen, but all of a sudden we stumble across something that is very valuable. It is so valuable to us that we do anything we can to possess it. When I was a young man and courting Katherine, I didn’t have any money. Any money I had at that point, I

would have gladly paid in order to marry her, because she was something valuable to me. After sixty years she's still valuable.

The man in the parable found something that was worth so much, he was willing to go and take inventory of everything that he had and sell it all in order to be able to purchase the field. God's grace had unexpectedly come to him and he was joyful to be able to buy the field.

The second man was a little different. He was calculating. He didn't stumble upon this pearl; he had been hunting for it. He was a true merchant. He looked at many pearls. He finally came across one that was extremely valuable and he knew it. He took inventory of all he had and sold it all in order to buy this single pearl of great value.

What are these parables telling us? If we stumble into the kingdom accidentally, it's by God's grace. Many of us here are thankful for the families in which we grew up. They helped us find faith. They surrounded us with love. They enabled us to move forward knowing that we were one of God's children and that our lives counted for something.

Others were not able to share that kind of happy childhood. They had it more difficult, but yet they too found faith. God found them and they responded in faith. So, however we come into the kingdom, it is worth everything that we have and everything that we are. The kingdom is to be shared. If we try to hold it to ourselves, we lose it. Did not Jesus say the man who tries to hold on to his soul will be the one who loses it? You don't hold on to things that are most valuable in terms of love and life, you share them. The kingdom was meant as a gift to be given away. Somehow, the more we give it away, the more of it we seem to have. Conversely, the less of it we're willing to share, the less of it we seem to have. It's God's economy that the kingdom is something to be shared with the whole world. We're called to be in the business of being kingdom people.

Fred Craddock tells another story about a little town in Oklahoma that he went to as pastor. The town had three little churches and each one had a Sunday morning service. Each church had a relatively small but very faithful congregation. Craddock said there was another sort of unofficial church in the town that met at the café. This congregation was made up of a bunch of men who didn't go to church much. They sent their wives and children, but they didn't go. They sat around the café drinking coffee and eating donuts and swapping fish stories. The leader of that group was a man named George. When the pastor first hit town he was walking down the sidewalk and ran into George, and George said, "I understand you're the new preacher in town, and I don't want you bothering me. I'm not coming to church. I work hard, I support my family, I mind my own business, so don't bother me about church."

The pastor said, "I'm not going to bother you about church. You know you're welcome anytime, but I'm not going to bug you about it."

That went on for several years. All of a sudden one Sunday George showed up at church. The congregation was amazed, and when his buddies down at the café heard about it they couldn't believe it. "Does he have cancer or something?" they wondered. Was he worried about dying? Is that why he's going to church? What's going on? He joined the church and became a very faithful member, one of the hardest workers in the church. He did many things for the good of the community. He was just a totally different man.

Fred said one day he finally got up the courage to talk to him about it. He said, "You remember how you used to tell me you weren't coming to church, that you minded your own business?"

George said, "Yeah."

Fred asked, "Do you still feel that way?"

George said, “Yes, I still mind my own business, but I found out what my real business is.”

Isn't this the kingdom? To find out what our real business is? To find out that God has loved us and his grace has come to us, and we are called to share that with the whole creation. So here we are, about the kingdom.

One fundamental truth: God does it all.

The second fundamental truth is, God calls us to help him in the enterprise. Let's get busy about God's business.

Let us pray. God we thank you, unworthy though we sometimes are, you call us to the work of the kingdom. Help us to be faithful in Jesus' name, Amen.