

Unexpected Kin-dom

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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As we near the end of the summer camp and conference season, many of our youth face the same question about their time away: "How was it?" or, more accurately, "What was it like?" You may have been asked this, too- to explain a delicious meal, an exotic vacation, a special place. And as poets and writers have done throughout the centuries, you may have found yourself searching for a metaphor, a way to capture the *feeling* of what it was like while articulating something unique about your experience. How do you explain the warm heat of Mo-Ranch on the shoulders of 200 youth worshipping God together? How do you explain the sleepy car rides and questions asked about God and faith in the midst of service?

We are taught metaphors at a very young age. From "twinkle twinkle little star's" "like a diamond in the sky" to Shakespeare's "shall I compare thee to a summer's day", metaphors, or "what it was like" are a part of our cultural idioms and shared experience.

In our passage today, Jesus shares with us what the kingdom of God is "like." Jesus provides a litany of metaphors- including one of my favorite images from the Gospels- the little mustard seed. Jesus is using metaphor here to express that even the smallest of things is like the kingdom of God. He wants us to understand that the small and ordinary can turn into something extraordinary.

This metaphor can remind us of how small acts of kindness and love can go a long way. As I work with our youth, I remember the mission trips from my teenage years. When asked, "What was it like?" many on one of my favorite mission trips to Santa Fe may have mentioned the stunning mountain vistas, or the ability to ski down a mountain on fresh snow. They may have struggled to put words to the work we did- the partnership we had with Meals on Wheels, an organization that provides food to those impoverished who are unable to prepare meals for themselves because of physical and/or financial limitations.

"What was it like?" as a small group of 10 youth and my youth director, as we delivered food to different people in need of meals. "What was it like?" to learn the stories and enjoy the small talk of the people we visited? These moments require metaphor, language that communicates beyond logistics.

To use a metaphor of my own, some of Jesus' parables are like an onion, where we peel back layer after layer. Jesus' metaphors and parables are so provocative that we discover multiple meanings to ponder. These parables are so rich that new meanings emerge as our spiritual life matures.

"What's it like?", the kingdom of God. Jesus never provides a concise, unambiguous answer. Instead, Jesus illustrates the kingdom by comparing it to ordinary things his early followers could understand. That's what we find in today's passage. He delivers five, rapid fire metaphors that impart an impression of God's kingdom- ordinary, commonplace images like mustard seed, like yeast, like a buried treasure, like a valuable pearl, like a fishing net.

To help us grasp what Jesus is saying, we need to remember that the early followers of Jesus were subjected to Roman occupation. The Roman Empire was an earthly kingdom that was brutal and suffocating. The Old Testament prophets had envisioned a day when God's kingdom would be present on earth. They envisioned a day when swords would be beaten into plowshares, the oppressed would be set free and justice would reign. Jesus expanded on this notion and described the kingdom as a place where the hungry would be fed, the ill would be healed, the weak would be cared for and the repentant would be forgiven. Jesus reconciled the sweeping with the ordinary, and provided a new definition of "kingdom" for his followers.

And here we encounter the unexpected- how do we, as modern people in a broken and fearful world, see the "kingdom" today? What is it like...now?

Some of you may have read today's sermon title and thought it a typo. But the concept of "kin-dom" aligns with Jesus' intentions for us as God's new creation. To go to the origin of this new, unexpected term, we must look at the theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. In her work, "Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal," Isasi-Diaz challenges the traditional interpretation of the scriptural view of a Kingdom of God as a metaphor for a coming world order. Isasi-Diaz explains this version of "kingdom" as reflective of the dominant, often oppressive cultural experience of societies during Biblical times. This historical view of Kingdom suggested exclusion- allowing only those with the same beliefs and cultures access- which challenges our concept of an all-knowing and all-loving God.

To offer a more modern perspective, Isasi-Diaz proposes a view based on Mujerista Liberation theology in which the fullness of life and liberation of families and communities cannot be attained through oppression of others. Emphasizing the importance of family in Latin culture, she uses the metaphor of "Kin-dom," grounding this modern concept of kingdom in the hopes and dreams of family and relationship as a sustaining foundation for all societal and spiritual experience. In kin-dom, the shared experience of life forms the basis for how people survive and flourish. Intrinsically linked to the honor of family, this framework is a multi-generational union of voices and experiences in which there is room for all.

This inclusion and creation of a new family mirrors Jesus' descriptions of his disciples as his new kin. Providing an impetus for reconstituting family not as Roman-authoritarian but one offering warmth, protection, and provision for lasting relationships, Kin-dom offers a communally-oriented foundation for mutuality, justice, and the restoration of faith and society.

Jesus' ministry initiated the revolution that opposed all human kingdoms and set the stage for the full realization of God's presence through us as God's new creation. The people he addressed with these metaphors, these parables, were experiencing the harsh rule of Rome each day of their lives. Their freedom was severely restricted, their society was structured to keep them in poverty and they lived in constant fear. Jesus said an alternative kingdom, God's kin-dom, was taking root. At the present time it was no more impressive than a miniscule mustard seed, but over time it would grow into something immense. How is the kin-dom like yeast that leavens bread? Yeast is just small granules, but when mixed with flour, it will make the flour rise.

In a similar way, God's kin-dom is hidden from the eyes of the Roman rulers. They do not recognize it. Yet, as the yeast transforms the flour and creates bread, the coming of God's presence transforms the world through the acts of kindness and mercy, and love that we do. Early followers of Jesus felt our modern frustration- they, too, felt like nothing seemed to be happening and their efforts seemed to be achieving nothing. But their work, like ours, was having a gradual impact, slowly changing the world as more and more people adopted a new creed by which to live: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Matthew 22:39). How is the kin-dom like a treasure hidden in a field, where upon discovery, a man sold everything he had in order to buy the field? Or like a merchant who discovered a valuable pearl and liquidated his assets in order to own it? Jesus is saying that once you grasp the value of this kin-dom, you will go to extreme measures to live it and demonstrate it, telling everyone "what it is like."

Finally, Jesus says that the kin-dom is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. With this final parable, Jesus contrasts the Roman Empire with God's kin-dom. The Roman Empire relied on propaganda, oppression, cruelty, greed, violence and fear. God's Kin-dom relies on truth, justice, compassion, generosity, peace and hope. The metaphors he gives here challenges- what will you risk in order to acquire this renewing life in God's Kin-dom?

Jesus told these five brief parables, not to describe simply the essence of God's kin-dom, but to encourage our participation in it. He does not want us to be swept up by the kingdoms of this world and miss the one kin-dom that is life-giving and everlasting. Jesus stretched language, allowed room for metaphor, and described the kingdom in ways both humble and challenging.

Jesus uses such language and such images to offer an "alternative" to that way of life, to offer a word of hope and possibility. Theologian Bernard Brandon Scott writes, "For all those who are leaven in their society, this parable assures them that the [kin-dom] of God is like them. In Jesus' society this was a large majority of people," whether they were unable to fulfill the demands of their religion or barely able even to survive, or pushed to the margins of their society (Scott, Re-Imagine the World).

Scott says that this "leaven" consisted not of a minority at the bottom but a majority, "at least 80% of the population of first century Palestine who lived a subsistence existence" (Scott, Re-Imagine the World). His observation surely reminds us of the growing inequities and gaps in our own society, and around the world, with the movement of resources and wealth upward to a smaller number, while a larger number slides into poverty.

Scott speaks persuasively and movingly of the "default world" that we live in, and the "counter-reality" that just a glimpse of the presence of God's kin-dom offers, an assurance of other, better possibilities and options: the parable offers hope and love which has immense and extraordinary power (Scott, Re-Imagine the World). Certainly a different God is revealed in these stories, different from the one encased in religious practice and prejudice, the "what was it like" God that contradicts just what Jesus was saying.

Within his own tradition, Jesus preached good news of a God who loves and accepts God's own kin and keeps company with those on the margins. Within the life of our church, we might offer that same glimpse, that possibility and promise, and see what might unfold right before our eyes, if we indeed have eyes to see it.

My time partnering in mission with Meals on Wheels in Santa Fe was beyond words. However, our group did receive a glimpse of the impact of our work- words that framed our experience in a way we could not. Our youth director read us a letter from one of the clients of Meals on Wheels in Santa Fe. The client wrote how much it had made her day that we came to bring her food. She expressed that it moved her that we were so warm to her and that we wanted talk to her instead of just dropping off the food and leaving. Rather than being strangers, she felt as if we were all old friends catching up. It wasn't as obvious to us until that letter how much of an impact our small youth group made. Our broadening of the kin-dom. Our own parable.

Jesus sets out to challenge us, in this passage and in his work, in word and deed, to fracture the hypnotic hold of life-as-it-has-always-been. He seeks to shift our attention, to alter our perception, to expand our awareness, to change our behavior. Because he sanctions not the world as it is (where the kin-dom is obscure) but only the world as it should be, when the kin-dom will be all in all. He is disconcerted that we look without seeing and fail to strive to create the love and kindness and warmth of God's kin-dom in our everyday. He reminds us that we are so wedded to everyday life and find so much comfort in material trinkets and the unstable circumstances of fleeting lives. So he constructs these parables, in the hope that we might begin to ponder soberly God's reign, and perhaps even to seek it, and perhaps even to seek it above all else.

So, "what IS it like", for you? God's kin-dom? Is it like a mustard seed? Like yeast? Like a pearl? Let's seek it together.