

TITLE: "What Is the Kingdom of God?"

TEXT: Luke 13:18-19, 20-21 (NT p. 76), Matthew 13:45-46 (NT p. 15)

Jesus asks: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

²⁰[Jesus] said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

⁴⁵Again [Jesus said], "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Introduction – The Kingdom of God

Way back in the 1920s, a man was taking a drive in the country when his car suddenly sputtered and died. He coasted to the side of the road and lifted the hood. As he was checking over the engine, an old horse came trotting by. The horse never slowed down. He just looked over at the man and said, "Better check your gasoline!"

The man was shocked. He looked all around, and there was not a soul in sight. He was so amazed, he ran to a nearby farm house and pounded on the door. When an old farmer answered, he told him what had happened.

"Was it an old horse with a floppy ear?" asked the farmer.

"Yes, Yes!" exclaimed the man.

"Oh, well," said the farmer, "don't believe everything he tells you; he don't know the first thing about cars."

This morning's sermon is about the kingdom of God. What does the kingdom of God have to do with us here this morning? ...Well, God PUT you and me here, in this very church in Dryden, to BUILD the kingdom of God.

So, if we're going to BUILD it, we better know what it is. It's always best to ask an expert on a subject, be it a car or anything else. So this morning we will see what Jesus SAYS about the kingdom of God, and I will weave his teaching with stands from a true story that I found in last month's *Guideposts* magazine.

The name of the story is "Gourmet Giving" by Tim Hammock.

It was past midnight when my shift ended and I walked outside into the warm California night. The streets of Yountville, a small town in Napa valley, were quiet. Lights were still on inside Bouchon, the gourmet French restaurant where I was an assistant chef. ...Here I was living my dream, working for one of the finest restaurants in one of the world's food capitals. And yet I wasn't happy. Something was eating at me—no pun intended. A conversation I'd had recently with a guy I knew from culinary school. I couldn't put his words out of my mind.

Dave Perez and I had taken different paths at school. I'd apprenticed at a restaurant in Berkley, epicenter of the American gourmet food revolution. From there I'd worked my way up to Bouchon, which was owned by Thomas Keller, a world-renowned chef. Dave worked in a homeless shelter in one of northern California's poorest cities, the Bay Area Rescue Mission in Richmond. A few days earlier I'd sat down with Dave at a coffee shop.

"I've got a proposal for you, Tim," Dave had said. I listened as he sketched out a vision of a cooking school at the rescue mission, a hands-on kitchen where recovering addicts could cook food for homeless patrons while earning course credit in a local community college culinary program. "I want you to run the kitchen and teach these guys," Dave concluded. "You'd be perfect. You've definitely got the cooking skills."

Go from Bouchon to a homeless shelter? I didn't say so to Dave, but that sounded like career suicide. "Maybe I could volunteer sometime," I said instead. "But I don't think it's the job for me."

...When the Hebrews were wandering in the desert after they left Egypt, why did God give Moses such explicit instructions as to how the tabernacle, the moveable place of worship, was to be constructed? ...When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, why were the directions for the building and the contents so specific? ...Because God wanted these to be earthly replicas of the place of worship that is in heaven (Hebrews 8:5: "[the earthly] sanctuary is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one.")

Likewise, our church is to be a replica of what it is like in heaven. By "church" I do not mean our church building, nice as it is. What is supposed to be like heaven is our church FAMILY, you and me. As we live like heavenly individuals, and as we live like a heavenly community, we ARE the kingdom of God.

Therefore, the kingdom of God is like an embassy in a foreign country. We live in a world dominated by lust and greed and self-centered ambition. WE are an outpost in this foreign land and we are to demonstrate to others what it is like to BE a COMMUNITY of God. This means that individually and corporately we are to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control. As we do, the kingdom of God grows within us.

1. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed

HOW does the kingdom of God grow within us? Jesus says it begins like a tiny mustard seed. What has a mustard seed got to do with it? ...Let's get back to the story:

Dave Perez, it turned out, was persistent. Even though I'd said no, he called back. A few days later I was having coffee with him again. "I thought you might have reconsidered," Dave said. "Why don't you come to the rescue mission?"

[Once there] I had to admit I felt more at home than I'd expected. None of the [kitchen] equipment was top-of-the-line as Bouchon was. The ingredients—pallets of strawberries past their sell by date, giant blocks of what appeared to be bologna—were nothing like Bouchon's custom-grown organic meat and produce. Dave introduced me to some of the cooks. One was a recovering meth addict. Others had come to the shelter months before, drunk, strung out, at the end of their rope. "This place has been a lifesaver for me," one said. The others nodded.

Something inside of me seemed to shift. ...I looked at Dave. Already my excuses were evaporating. A voice inside—was it mine? God's?—whispered yes. Before I quite knew what I was doing, I heard that word escape my mouth. Dave grinned. "I knew it!" he cried. "Tim, you're going to love it here."

Jesus asks: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

The mustard seed that will start the kingdom of God growing in you is faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus means that you, like Tim in the story, are willing to give up your ambitions, hopes and dreams and say these words in the hymn we will sing later, written by Mary Brown:

"I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,
O'er mountain or plain or sea;
I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord,
I'll be what you want me to be.

2. The kingdom of God is like yeast

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like yeast. What does this mean? ...Let's return to the story:

Dave was right. Quitting Bouchon was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but the moment I parked my car in the rescue mission lot and strode inside to start my first day of work, I didn't look back. Today, my assistant chefs and I feed up to 1,200 homeless people a day.

Over the course of a year, 500 recovering addicts pass through my kitchen. Only about 70 stick with recovery and an even smaller number end up going to culinary school. But I'm thankful even for those numbers.

²⁰And again [Jesus] said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Yeast turns unpalatable dough into delicious bread that is wonderful to eat. So does the kingdom of God transform useless, unproductive lives into functional and faithful people. These people can in turn help others.

I am so happy with our youth group members who OBVIOUSLY have this yeast because they are supporting mission programs like Weekend Backpacks, Thanksgiving Baskets and Christmas gifts for 3 Dryden families.

I really appreciate those who are involved in the Kitchen Cupboard and in the Web program.

I am thankful for those who give to the mission programs we sponsor, such as the Presbyterian THANK OFFERING, which helps poor and needy people all around the world.

Especially this morning, I thank those who support our church financially. YOU are helping to build the kingdom of God right here in Dryden, YOU are making our world a better place and YOU are demonstrating to those in our community that we ARE the kingdom of God.

3. The kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls

⁴⁵[Jesus says that], "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Is it WORTH it to make the sacrifice necessary to turn our lives over to Jesus and allow the kingdom of God to grow within us? ...Let's hear what Tim has to say:

Really, every meal here is a blessing. For the people we serve. For the guys who cook beside me. And for me, the gourmet chef who learned that sometimes love and faith are a successful kitchen's most important ingredients.

It obviously WAS worth it for Tim. But some may wonder, at times, if it is worth it for you.

Is it worth it to spend the time and effort to teach Sunday school,
to make choir practice every week or
to join the church?

Is it worth it to serve on a committee,
to sacrifice part of a Sunday afternoon for a church work day or
to commit to a tithe and make out a pledge card?

Is it worth it spend hours and hours working on the link renovation,
to come to Sunday school, youth group or Bible study or
to work on the rummage sale?

Is it worth it to help at the Kitchen Cupboard,
to buy snacks for the WEB program and food for Thanksgiving Baskets or
to give to mission programs?

Is it worth it? ...YES! For those who do these things, here is God's promise for you:
"... all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according
to his purpose" (I Corinthians 10:13). If you allow the kingdom of God to grow within
you, and if you work to BUILD the kingdom of God here in Dryden where God planted
you, you will find the same love, joy and peace that Tim found when he left his
prestigious job at Bouchon and started working for the rescue mission.

Conclusion – Shaped for glory

Is it always easy? ...No. It was not easy for Tim and it's not always easy for us. But,
there IS a reason God wants the kingdom of God to grow within us. What is it?
Let me close with a story:

During the great Depression, a man lost his job, exhausted his savings, and
forfeited his home. His grief was multiplied by the sudden death of his precious
wife. The only thing he had left was his faith, and his faith was weakening.

One day when he was combing the neighborhood for work, he stopped to watch
some men who were doing the stonework on a huge cathedral. One of those men
was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. Not seeing a place where it would fit, the
man asked, "Where are you going to put that?"

The mason pointed toward the very top of the building and said, "See that little
opening up there near the spire? That's where it goes. I'm shaping it down here, so
it will fit in up there."

It's for glory, folks. If we will allow God to shape us down here on earth, we will find, to
our amazement, that we fit perfectly into our place of glory in heaven. And ours will BE
a perfect fit, forever and ever and ever.

Amen.