

## Week 8: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The lectionary has done us a disservice by putting together two groupings of parables that have different emphases. Both sets talk about the Kingdom, but they emphasize different aspects of it. Verses 44-52 contain three parables that underscore the value of the Kingdom. As Matthew's church has endured persecution, some have wondered whether remaining a member is worth it. These parables say that the Kingdom is so valuable that, if you saw its true value, you would do ridiculous things to be in it. In one parable a merchant puts himself out of business to buy a single item and in another a person cheats the owner of a field by buying it under false pretenses. The final parable of this trio reminds readers to the God's coming judgment. So, if understanding the blessings is not enough to keep you in, the reminder of what awaits if you abandon it may help encourage you to stay.

The two parables in vv. 31-33 are tucked between the telling of the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (vv. 24-30) and its interpretation by Jesus (vv. 36-43). The Wheat and Weeds parable acknowledges that evil will remain a part of the world until the end. But it also claims the whole world as the realm that Christ will reign. The parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven emphasize the far-reaching importance and vast expanse of the Kingdom. In both, what seems to be small and insignificant becomes something more important than one would expect. The mustard seed is said to be the smallest of seeds, but one that becomes a tree. These descriptions are not literally the case (a mustard plant is not a tree), but they point to the radical disparity between current appearances and future realities. In the narrative, the ministry of Jesus may seem small and insignificant (it has not made it to Jerusalem), but in the end its importance will be evident. Just as that tiny seed becomes a plant that can provide a home for birds, so God's Kingdom will be so expansive that it can be a home for God's people.

The parable of the Leaven, or the Yeast, shifts the focus a bit. By speaking of the way a little yeast influences a large amount of flour, this parable says that the kingdom will infuse all the earth. In ancient Palestine, leaven came from keeping back a bit of the last batch of dough to mix with the next one. There was always a danger that it would go bad and make everyone sick. Leaven was also a symbol of uncleanness. So Jesus takes a dangerous and impure substance and converts it into a symbol of the Kingdom. This may be one of the ways this parable points to the Kingdom as a realm that subverts and reverses the values of the present world. We should also note how much flour is involved: 39 liters! This is not a single loaf for a family, it is preparation for a banquet. At the same time, this magnifies the contrast between present appearance and future reality.

Sandwiched between the telling and interpretation of the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, these parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven see the successful expansion and pervasive influence of the Kingdom as an eschatological act of God. The church can be sure that the will of God will prevail in the end. That assurance is a call to participate in the work of the Kingdom now. If God's intention is for God's will to prevail over all the earth, God's people are to be involved in the work of proclaiming that will and working for its implementation in the present. The church's mission includes the task of working to infuse the world's structures and values with God's will.

The church is an eschatological institution. Its founding is one of the events that signals the beginning of the coming of the Kingdom of God. As a manifestation of the Kingdom, the church seeks to fulfill God's will in the present. If God intends to permeate the world with God's own will, the church is to participate in that goal by working to influence all of the world with the values that come from God's character (e.g., justice, love, holiness). The church is a current manifestation of the leaven in the world. As such, it must seek to instill the Kingdom's values and perspectives into all cultural, political, and economic structures. Only by doing so does the church live out its true identity as a present and visible sign of God's coming reign.