

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like ...”  
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

What do you think the kingdom of heaven is like?

A feeling of eternal peace? A long, green grassy fairway? Clouds, harps and angels?

Jesus gives us a few images to ponder:

It's like a massive shrub that grows from a seemingly insignificant seed.

It's like the most beautiful, precious pearl you've ever seen.

It's like finding a hidden treasure.

It's like the miracle of turning ground grain into bread by adding a few tiny grains of yeast.

It's like a bulging net of floppy fish of every kind that God has gathered together.

They're beautiful images; maybe even images of eternity. Don't we like to think of heaven as expansive, with security for all who seek it? And as incredibly valuable, worth giving up everything for? And that we have been chosen to be in it?

But what if Jesus isn't only talking about the kingdom of heaven as some faraway place. What if the kingdom of heaven is something we catch glimpses of as we go about our daily lives? What if it's anywhere God is breaking into our world? And what if Jesus isn't just talking about what God does to bring this kingdom about; what if he's talking about those things that we do to spread God's love, to ease people's pain, to right a wrong. Isn't that a kingdom we want to be a part of? Something that we can take part in every day, right here, right, now?

That ideal sometimes seems impossible given what goes on in the world today. How can the kingdom exist in a place where a youth camp is turned into a terror zone? Where politicians elected for the common good aren't able to compromise? Where

thousands of starving women and children in Somalia walk hundreds of miles to Kenya only to be told there is no food for them. That doesn't sound much like God's kingdom.

But maybe there's room for God those places in these parables, too. After all, the images Jesus paints aren't exactly of perfection:

The rotting fish stink up the whole net.

The woman corrupts the pure flour with the leaven.

The man isn't completely upfront about what's in the field when he buys it.

The pearl costs the merchant everything he has.

The mustard seed invades the whole garden.

Those images sound a whole lot more like earth, where life is messy and complicated and sometimes desperately in need of God.

So maybe when Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, he's trying to get us to imagine transforming our world into one that looks a whole lot more like what God intends. In that world, every person – no matter their age or color or education level or gender – every person is precious and valuable, like the pearl of great price. In that world, the word of God permeates each heart, like yeast that leavens flour. In that world, God's grace is discovered in unexpected places, like the treasure hidden in the field.

In Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*, he writes, "When Jesus talks about [our eternal reward] he's promising ... that receiving the peace of God now, finding gratitude for what [we] do have, and sharing it with those who need it will create in [us] all the more capacity for joy in the world to come. Jesus teaches us how to live now in such a way that what we create, who we give our efforts to, and how we spend our time will all endure in the new world." It won't matter if we reach heaven out there if we don't start

by helping heaven break in down here. This life we have is just as precious to God as eternal life might be.

What does it look like when God's kingdom breaks into this world? My glimpse of it came in a series of text messages with my 13-year-old daughter this morning. She wanted to know what I was preaching about. I told her, the kingdom of heaven and our partnership in bringing it about. *Phrase that in normal terms*, she said.

So I told her, *It's about how God wants us to experience his love now, and that when we share it other people get to know God too.*

And within seconds she texts back, *then talk about mission trips (a whole bunch of people giving and showing God's love to others) or how when you bring friends to church they experience God's love and word through worship. Or how when kids come to VBS they get to see that God cares for them through the fun people who volunteer.*

The kingdom of heaven comes when 13-year-olds connect the dots about faith. And when we invite others to worship. And when we come together to serve. And when VBS volunteers welcome kids. The kingdom of heaven comes in a million little ways. I think it shows up when people pray together. When parents and children volunteer to serve as a family. When a coworker from another country becomes a friend. God's kingdom shows up when an alcoholic finds support at an AA meeting. When loved ones gather at a bedside to say goodbye. When a homeless person finds safe shelter for the night. God's kingdom shows up whenever arms and doors and minds and hearts are opened. It shows up whenever words of forgiveness are spoken. Whenever people come together to help those who have less.

And the thing about God's kingdom is, it will find a way to emerge even in the midst of the hardest, saddest, most hopeless-seeming situations. Last week on our Midwest Hunger Tour eleven Zumbro youth and adults spent four days learning about poverty and some of the efforts to relieve it. Parts of our trip were really depressing. It's hard to think about so many people and so much need. But we also met five people who have given their hearts and lives to this cause. One was an ag professor who started a community garden so the local food shelf would have healthy, fresh produce. One serves a free community meal twice a day, six days a week so all might have a place to belong at the table. One was a recent college grad who's passionate about food and justice issues. One manages a transitional housing shelter with compassion borne out of her own experience as a homeless child. In the grand scheme of things, are their efforts small? Yes. Are they largely hidden from the world? You bet. Do they face an uphill battle in making a difference? Definitely. But with every life they touch they bring God a little closer. That's the kingdom of heaven, here on earth.

Friends, you may not run a soup kitchen, but you can contribute to a food shelf. You may not start a community garden, but you can help tend God's creation. You may not change public policy, but you can write a letter to your congressman. You may not be able to go on a mission trip, but you can pray for those who do. God can and will use you to be leaven and mustard seeds for a world in need. God's love comes to life through you.

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like: God's work and our hands coming together to transform the world. So thy kingdom come, O Lord, on earth as in heaven. Amen.