

I really struggled with the gospel this week. And I know it is because of the kingdom language. Every parable starts with The Kingdom of God is like. As a Christian born and bred, kingdom language is a normal part of Bible language. I remember learning a song I really liked in vacation Bible school one year in about 3rd grade. Some of you may remember it. Kids of the Kingdom, that's what we are, Kids of the kingdom, that's what we are... It was catchy tune and me and my sister probably drove my parents crazy singing it so much. Dad read the Chronicles of Narnia to us where the lion Aslan, who is Jesus in the story, is the king. None of that bothered me then. However, these years later, with my knowledge of what a kingdom is and as a feminist Christian theologian, kingdom starts to seem not the greatest term for God's work in the world. Yet, here is something that excited me in my study.

Now when we think of kingdoms, we think of a place, right? A place with Kings, queens, princesses, and knights, with territories and land? A hierarchy where a few are at the top and many more are at the bottom. Yet theologian M. Eugene Boring argues in Matthew kingdom is not a place at all. Rather, it is "a symbol that evokes...the sacred story of the creator God's saving act." The kingdom of God represents God's salvation in the world. It is movement and action, not a place. It is a process that can exist in the past, present or future. For example, Boring says John the Baptist in Matthew 3:2 says to "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." In Matthew 12: 28 where Jesus talks about exorcism, he says "if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." In Matthew 11:12 the kingdom itself suffers violence at the hands of humans and in Matthew 6:10 Jesus teaches people to pray for the kingdom to come. In other words, it is more complicated than just a place. And it takes God's kingdom out of the realm of the earthly kingdoms that do not seem to be living out the love of God.

Kingdom language is an important concept for Matthew. In fact, he uses it more than any writer in the New Testament. It connects Matthew with the Jewish understanding that God is the creator and only ruler as opposed to all of the kingdoms on earth that are not doing God's will, including Israel at times. God gives kingship to Her chosen people, who accept the burden of following the will of God. Then God's chosen pray for the final coming of God's kingdom, which is present only partially in the now and waiting for completion in the future. For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah who "has already begun to bring an end to the rebellious kingdoms and to reestablish the reign of God in this world." Therefore, the kingdom for which the community prays is the return of the Messiah who will establish God's rule over the earth. Through Jesus's parables we see what that kingdom looks like.

There are other options rather than kingdom. Ana Maria Isasi-Diaz was a Latinx theologian who coined the term *Mujerista*. *Mujerista* refers to a theology which came to her through her understanding of scripture and her experiences as a Latinx woman part of a Latinx community. In her essay "Kin-dom of God: A *Mujerista* proposal," she says it is clear from the gospels, especially in Jesus's arrest and the reason for his execution, that the gospel writers were not referring to the kingdoms that existed in Palestine or Rome, or any of the human made kingdoms. God's Kingdom is a different kind of Kingdom as Isasi-Diaz says we can see in the parables, Jesus's other forms of preaching, and his miracles. She uses the term *kin-dom*, a term that comes from her friend Sister Georgiana Wilson in the 1970's, and points to the importance of familial relationships in Latinx communities. *Kin-dom* implies community and relationship rather than power over and *kin-dom* would seem to express God's world more than kingdom. As we will see from the parables in today's reading, God's world is not like earthly kingdoms.

It was not included in today's reading but the first two parables about the mustard seed and the yeast were to the crowds and the last three about the treasure, the pearl, and the fish were only to the disciples. M Eugene Boring argues this signifies that Jesus is talking to the world in the first two parables and Jesus is talking to the church in the next three. It is striking the stories Jesus uses in these parables for the gospel lesson are about everyday people - a farmer, a cook, a fisherman, a merchant. These are not kings and queens, emperors or heads of state. They are everyday people Jesus's listeners would have come across in their lives. Notice in the first two parables Jesus includes the story of a man and then the story of a woman. You may have noticed it is very common in Jesus's parables to give one message through a story about a man and then give the same message through a story about a woman. For example, in Luke fifteen Jesus tells one story about a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and then a woman searching for a lost coin. In preaching this way, Jesus includes everyone people of the time would have interacted with.

The story of the mustard seed and the yeast are two slightly different stories about the same concept. Something small becomes something large. Both of these stories are a little over the top though. A mustard seed does not really create a large tree. It creates a small tree, more of a bush rather than a tree. Yet it is a place that is a protector for birds. There are scholars who argue that Jesus is pointing back to trees in the imagery of Ezekial and Daniel that represent empire. Yet this empire is not comparable to earthly empires and that seems to be the point. As John Carroll points out "God's reign starts small, and even in its effective operation it is no majestic, towering tree. Yet it gets the job done, bringing life and help and hope to all manner of people." God gets huge things done through small things. It is the same in the next story about the yeast.

As you probably know, yeast is a small little living being that can create bread. This parable shows a woman breaking bread but not just a loaf. The amount of dough she is using would actually produce a massive amount of product about 40 loaves. In the story she hides the yeast. That is a strange way of talking about cooking but Carroll says that concealment is important here. "Hidden and unseen within the bread lies the source of its inevitable transformation." It is also not the woman responsible for the transformation so she is not kneading the bread or mixing the yeast in. She simply hides it and God transforms the dough.

We can see evidence of God everyday transforming the world through something small. Sometimes that is through small people as through a child like Jahkil Jackson. Yet change can also happen through a small action. We probably do not even know the number of times God working through us changes the world. Yet through some small act we may be making a huge difference. One day Zander and I were at the post office, and there was a man sitting on the ground with his back to the wall. He looked like he may not have had a place to go and Zander was concerned about it and wanted to help him. We went over and had a conversation with the man and he said he did not need anything but that he was grateful we had stopped by. Like the yeast that is hidden in the dough, we have no idea how small actions God engages in through us can transform the world. Perhaps we are not meant to know but God knows. God's active love can spread throughout the world through the interactions she makes through us. Oftentimes, change starts out small. In 2007, nine year old Felix Finkbeiner, was asked to do a presentation on climate change for his classmates. This small, normal, everyday action ended up with a global tree-planting movement. This again shows God working through something hidden that blooms into something big. Who knew when Felix gave that presentation what would happen? It could have just been a presentation and ended there. Yet this small classroom project has turned into a

global movement through an organization called Plant for the Planet where people are advocating to plant trees! 3 years from the time of Felix's presentation the organization would plant its millionth tree. Through something small, God brings something large.

Those first two parables are to the larger community, whereas the last three are specifically to the followers of Jesus. These are the people who are already committed to God's work, whereas within the crowd there could be followers or it could just be a group of people listening. The crowd is the beginning of God's work, it is the mustard seed or the yeast and it is not yet known where people in the crowd will go. These next three parables, however are for the people through whom God has been successful. Of course, that does not mean that they are perfect and perfectly listen to God. However, they are in relationship with God and God is working through them no matter how often they have a hard time hearing.

Through the parables about the treasure and the pearl, Jesus shows the disciples how valuable God's world is. Again, in these parables there is a sense of being hidden. The treasure is hidden and the man must search for it, the pearl is also hidden and the merchant looks for it. Then these two people sell everything for that one treasure or that one pearl. Yet, that does not mean, that we now possess the kingdom of heaven. It is a gift. This is actually what the disciples did, isn't it? They gave up everything they had to follow Jesus, to accept God's gift. These two stories ask the question, how much are you willing to sacrifice for God? We certainly know that for some of us there are major sacrifices that we make. Luther was willing to take the risk of standing up to the Roman Catholic Church to do God's work in the world. There are people who had lost their lives doing what he did. Yet God protected him and worked through him to make changes in the church that needed to be made. Bonhoeffer did lose his life doing God's work. Yet, he was willing to make that sacrifice for God. He could have stayed in the United States

where he was studying, yet he knew that that is not where God wanted him. Most of us are not called to do something like what Luther or Bonhoeffer did and yet sometimes even small sacrifices can be challenging. Where do we spend our money or time? How do we manage the way we interact with others? Do we lose our temper or do we turn our frustration over to God? What do we value and what are we willing to do for it? That is the point of these parables. Do we engage with God and turn to Her in our times of need? Or do we go somewhere else? Do we put anything above God? These parables seem to remind the disciples to turn to God, to continuously seek God because God and God's kingdom is more important than anything else. How do we honor God's gift to us?

The final story shows how we live with both the good and the bad. There is good and evil in our world until God sorts it out. That sorting also is hidden. We don't know what that will look like but we can trust that God will keep Her word that She will be with us. This parable does not mean that we do not make changes where we can. In fact, the parables where people are seeking God's kingdom show us that we can play an active role in challenging the evil on the planet, the things are not of God. Yet, it also reminds us that no matter how much God works through us to bring the good, this is more than we can do on our own. This is within God's domain. As Reinhold Niebur wrote: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference, living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; taking this world as it is and not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Learning when we can act and when we need to let go is a never-ending challenge and yet God can guide us to determine which is which. We will not always get it right and we will not always know the

outcome of our actions or our silence. However, stay in relationship with God and She will always guide you.