

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

Matthew 13:24-35

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is the fourth Sunday of our 2019 Faith Questions series—a sermon series where your questions set my agenda.

For the last two Sundays of the series—today and March 3, we’re going to be looking at the kingdom of God. Or, the “kingdom of heaven” as Matthew refers to it.

What is it? What *isn't* it? How, when, and where does it come? And what are the implications for us here and now?

I’m going to try to address these questions (and maybe a few more!) over the next two sermons.

Like so many other terms that we use a lot in the church, we perhaps rarely pause to probe what “kingdom of heaven” language actually means.

(Aside: Matthew refers to it as the “kingdom of heaven.” Mark and Luke use the phrase “the kingdom of God” more often. But most scholars agree whatever the kingdom is, they’re talking about the same reality. Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience and faithful Jews refuse to speak the name of God out loud to avoid possibly taking the Lord’s name in vain)

Some Christians believe that the kingdom of heaven is just a synonym for, well, *heaven*. It’s just a phrase that Jesus uses to describe the afterlife.

When Jesus says, for example, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Mat 7:21), this seems to point to a future reality.

Other Christians say that the kingdom is entirely about *this* world with good news not for some distant afterlife but *right now!*

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people (Mat. 4:23).

Here, the good news of the kingdom is not a remote future hope but transforms the present flesh and blood reality of the poor, the sick, the downtrodden.

So, which is it? Does the kingdom refer to a future where all things are made new? Or to a present that is to be transformed according to God's purposes.

Is the kingdom of God a concrete, political state of affairs that brings physical liberation and justice for all? Or is it a state of the heart—a new way of hoping in a world where things are not as they ought to be?

Is it good news for the physically poor and downtrodden or for the "spiritually poor?" Is the kingdom a tangible thing or a mystical reality?

The answer, of course, is... yes.

The kingdom of heaven points to a new state of affairs where things are ordered rightly, where human lives and wills are finally in glad alignment with their Creator, when peace and justice and harmony and love take the place of war and cruelty and greed and hatred.

The "kingdom of heaven" points to a time when things are as God intended them to be, when God repairs and redeems his broken world.

The kingdom of heaven is what we long for even when we don't know we are longing for it.

It is now and not yet. It has come and is coming. It is a promised future and an invasion of the present.

It is both.

And, of course, the kingdom of heaven has everything to do with Jesus.

- from his birth in Bethlehem that sent rival kings and kings panicking
- to his proclamation of good news to the poor and liberation to the captives
- to his prophetic preaching that the mighty would be brought down and the lowly raised up which threatened the religious and political establishment that liked things just fine as they were, thank you very much
- to his audacious claim that all of the promises of God were being fulfilled in *him*, even if in unexpected ways

- to his trial before Pilate where he was asked once and for all about his kingship and his kingdom and he fell silent
- to his death and resurrection, the decisive moments in God's story—where Jesus chose forgiveness and self-sacrifice instead of armed revolution (which was what most people have wanted from their kings and their kingdoms, then and now)—a coronation that was a crucifixion and a resurrection that was a validation of everything that he was and taught.
- To his ascension to reign and rule at the right hand of God until he comes again.

Christians claim that the kingdom of heaven was decisively inaugurated in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is not an agenda that Jesus was tasked with implementing as if Jesus was king of the Secretary of State for divine foreign policy.

Jesus is both the one through whom the kingdom comes and the one who reigns and will reign in fullness. He is the agenda, the example, the implementor and the guarantor of the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed, Origen of Alexandria, a second century bishop said, simply, "Jesus *is* the kingdom in person."¹

I want to point to four things about the kingdom of God from our passage in Matthew this morning.

These do not sum up the New Testament teaching on the kingdom. I could have picked any number of other passages that would have emphasized different aspects of the kingdom.

But this passage points to what I think are important aspects of the kingdom of heaven that we need to understand as we seek to align ourselves with it.

1. The kingdom of heaven is opposed (Matthew 13:24-30)

An enemy is at work, Jesus says, sowing weeds among the wheat, attempting to prevent the growth of something good.

¹ Quoted in Brian Zahnd, *Postcards from Babylon: The Church in American Exile* (USA: Spello Press, 2019), 76.

The kingdom makes its way in the world in the face of rivals. Rival conceptions of the good life and how it is to be attained. Rival conceptions of how social affairs are to be arranged. Rival conceptions of power and how it is to be used, of money and what it is for, of what the point of being human is, of how salvation comes.

The kingdom of peace makes its way in a world addicted to violence and the greedy hoarding of power.

The kingdom of heaven is a threat to business as usual and its lesser kingdoms opposed it. This was so in Jesus' time and it remains the case today.

Jesus would never have been crucified if he came preaching an exclusively private religion about how to go to heaven when you die. This is no threat whatsoever to the kingdoms of men.

But a kingdom that is an indictment of the status quo? A kingdom that threatens allegiance to the powers that be? A kingdom that proclaims a different Lord? That's a threat.

It was a threat to imperial Rome and the Jewish temple elites that had cozied up to the empire.

And it is a threat today. Or it should be, at least. It challenges our culture's idolatrous addiction to self, to our rampant consumerism, to our neglect of the ones who so easily get ground up under the wheel of "business as usual."

The kingdom of heaven is always opposed because it demands a reordering of social arrangements, of human desire, of what we love and why.

This is the context in which the kingdom grows until the final harvest when the king will separate the weeds from the wheat.

2. The kingdom of heaven starts small (Matthew 13:31-32)

It is like the smallest of seeds—a mustard seed—that grows over time and becomes the largest of all.

It does not compel or overwhelm.

It doesn't look particularly impressive. You'd never imagine such potential in a tiny little seed. But the kingdom grows out of little things.

This is enormously encouraging. And this isn't the only time Jesus refers to mustard seeds. Elsewhere, he says,

"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted

and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you (Luke 17:5-6).

It's fascinating that Jesus uses this tiny little seed both to describe how his kingdom grows and to describe what is necessary for our participation in it.

In this case, Jesus was responding to his disciples' protests that nobody could possibly forgive in the way that Jesus was teaching. Jesus says, "Sure you can. All it takes is mustard seed."

This is enormously encouraging! Our faith might seem unimpressive and unpromising. But that's how all good things start, Jesus says. God can work with mustard seeds whether in growing faith, pursuing forgiveness, or advancing his kingdom.

3. The kingdom of heaven isn't easy to see (Matthew 13:33)

It takes very little yeast to make bread rise. I discovered this last night while Naomi and Claire were making pizza.

Yeast is technically a fungus! But I suppose "the kingdom of heaven is like a fungus" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. 😊

Eventually it changes the chemical composition of the flour and it becomes something that can nourish the world.

The kingdom of God works in a similar way. It works its way through ordinary lives and relationships and circumstances and transforms them. Almost imperceptibly.

It doesn't look like much—ordinary acts of forgiveness and mercy, simple acts of kindness and reconciliation, a determination to tell the truth even when it's not convenient, a stubborn faith that perseveres even through suffering, an insistence that God is to be found in the marginalized and the least of these...

It can be easy to miss the kingdom. Indeed, Jesus told the Pharisees, "You won't see the kingdom coming. It can't be observed that easily. The kingdom of God is a hidden thing that shows up among you, within you (Luke 17:20-21).

But eventually these little kingdom acts change the "chemical composition" of the world.

4. The kingdom of heaven is like a metaphor and a story (Matthew 13:34-35)

It's really interesting that very frequently when people wanted Jesus to explain this mysterious kingdom that he said had come in his ministry and his person, he told a story. He spoke in parables.

He said things like, “Well, you see, the kingdom of heaven is *like* this and that... it can be compared to such and such... You can see it, except when you can’t. It’s among you in community, in your hearts and minds but it’s also good news for the poor who need real help. It’s a future hope and a present reality. It’s something that God brings about but it’s also something that you participate in.

It’s tough to pin down. So why don’t I tell you a story?

I think this points to a fundamental truth about who we are as human beings.

We are “storied” creatures. We think and understand our lives in terms of a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with conflicts and challenges to overcome, with victories and defeats, with a plot, a destination, and a meaning.

In his book *Imagining the Kingdom*, Jamie Smith says,

It is narrative that trains our emotional perceptual apparatus to perceive the world as meaningful... Stories are like the air we breathe. Narrative is the scaffolding of our experience.²

Jesus knows this. And so, he both explains the kingdom and evokes a longing for it through metaphor, analogy, and story. He doesn’t issue a press release or a checklist of things that have to happen for the kingdom to come.

He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”

Jesus doesn’t tell us stories because we’re too thick to figure it out in straightforward language.

He tells stories because we are storied creatures and we are part of God’s story.

So, to sum up.

1. The kingdom of heaven is opposed.
2. The kingdom of heaven starts small.
3. The kingdom of heaven isn’t easy to see.

² James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 108.

4. The kingdom of heaven is like a story.

I want to offer one final word about the kingdom of heaven.

In the kingdom of heaven death will be no more.

I spent this week in Winnipeg at a pastor's conference at CMU. The theme of the conference was "Death, Funerals, and the Christian Hope." The conference was packed with pastors from across the Anabaptist spectrum alongside Anglicans and United church clergy and others. One person told me that attendance was double what it was for last year's conference.

We heard hard stories of death. Of pastors walking with people through at times unimaginable suffering and grief.

We live in a culture that seeks to keep death at arm's length, ignoring it until the very end (and sometimes even *at* the end—many people request no funerals).

But death always comes.

And we were reminded of the Christian conviction and hope that not even death can finally separate us those who are in Christ from God.

This is a radical claim, I know. I was reminded of this anew this week. There is, in one sense nothing more natural than death. Everyone dies. Everything dies.

And yet, Christianity has always insisted upon the unnaturalness of death.

The Christian hope has always been that the good, the true, and the beautiful *cannot* just be pleasant and useful fictions to console us for a few decades on a chunk of rock hurtling through space.

They *have* to mean more than that.

They point, surely, to the God who has set eternity in the human heart and who finally offers rest, wholeness, consummation, forgiveness, peace and, yes, even life eternal.

The kingdom of heaven, when it comes in fullness, is the place of God's sovereign rule over all things, where life, not death has the last word. Where every tear is wiped away. Where parents no longer grieve lost children, where people no longer take their own lives because death seems preferable to life, where spouses no longer have to watch as disease steals away the one they love the most, where all roads don't lead, ultimately, to the grave.

The kingdom of heaven is where these things have passed away, never to be remembered again.

Where we are forgiven and healed, where all of creation is liberated to flourish as it was intended in the beginning.

It sounds impossible. But the kingdom of heaven has always proclaimed that what seems impossible is true.

Peace is stronger than violence

Forgiveness heals the thirst for revenge.

Mourning leads to dancing.

Poverty is the road to true wealth.

Giving is the surest way of receiving.

Seeking leads to finding.

True worship liberates from idolatry and greed.

Love is stronger than fear.

Mercy triumphs over sacrifice.

Life swallows up death.

These things sound impossible. Maybe even too good to be true. And they are in the sad and predictable kingdoms of this earth.

But not in the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

