

WESTMINSTER
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Mustard Seeds

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Mixtapes

When I was a younger man, before the advent of streaming services, or even CDs, one of the highest art forms was to create the perfect mixtape. You can almost get close to this with making playlists on Apple Music or Spotify, but even that doesn't quite get it right. A playlist is limitless, you can add as many songs as you want, move them around, whatever. But a mixtape, once you started recording to it, you were locked in. (And bonus points if you are among those who used to have to listen to the radio with your finger on the record button, waiting for your favorite song to play). So, you had to get the order just right ahead of time, think about how one song flowed into the next son, all to make the perfect mix for either yourself, or someone you love. And usually, a good mixtape had a theme too. There might be a hodge podge of songs, different artists, different styles of music, but one theme that flowed the whole way through. And best of all, when the mixtape was really good, those songs would get stuck in your head.

The folks who organize our lectionary seem to have given us a really good mixtape of some of Jesus' smaller parables. You can take them all one at a time, and they do actually stand on their own. But, when you put them all together like this, they have a bit of a theme to them. They follow a pretty good mixtape flow.

Track One: The Kingdom.

The first track of any good mixtape is there to set the mood, to make sure we know what to expect from what's coming in the

mix. In this set of little parables, I think the opening track is right there in the first line: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”

Before we get to the parable, we ought to take a moment to consider this phrase “The Kingdom of Heaven, and if you’ll forgive me, it involves a quick church history lesson.

In 1517, Martin Luther had had it. The Catholic Church was in the business of selling indulgences, essentially passing out tickets to heaven to the highest bidder. I think if you gave enough, you were even guaranteed extra leg room. So, Luther nailed these 95 theses about how this was wrong to the door of Wittenberg, and protestantism was born, the tradition in which we stand now.

But because protestantism was born out of a protest around the nature of salvation, N.T. Wright argues (rightly, I think) that we have a tendency to make *everything* about salvation. When we read a phrase like “The Kingdom of Heaven,” our brains are hardwired to imagine the place we go when we die, with streets of gold and harp players and world without end. But, I don’t exactly think that’s what Jesus is aiming at in these parables.

When Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew 4, he preaches a short little sermon: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” For Jesus, the Kingdom isn’t about where we go when we die. That would treat this world like a waiting room, and Jesus isn’t interested in that. Instead, Jesus seems to always want to put the emphasis on how we’re moving through this world we’re in now. He cares about how we

represent the Kingdom with the way we manage this life. He can do all of that, because for Jesus, salvation for those who believe in him is a given. That part is already handled.

So, the takeaway from this track is that these parables are about how we move in the world as citizens of the Kingdom.

Track Two- The heavy hitter: Mustard Seeds

There was a comedian I listen to who had a fan come up to him after a show and ask why he mispronounced every single word in his act. To which he responded..."If that isn't the epitome of hyperbole..." (For those reading at home, he mispronounced both of those words to sound like the epi-tomb of hyper-bowl).

In fact, Jesus in this parable is drenching it with hyperbole, he's stretching things a lot.

Somewhere in my office is a still unpacked box, and in that unpacked box is a jar of mustard seeds. They are small to be sure, but they are actually not the smallest of the seeds. As previously mentioned, I don't have a green thumb at all, but I can name like 13 smaller seeds than mustard seeds. They're not the smallest of seeds, they're just tiny.

And they're not really trees either. If you've ever seen a mustard plant, you wouldn't use the word "tree." Maybe bush. Maybe shrub. Maybe. But farmers in biblical times would have had another word for them: weeds. They would have worked as hard as they could to get rid of this plant. So to use the

mustard plant as a parable would have brought some words to mind in his agrarian culture's listeners: Weed. Nuisance. Invasive. Problem.

It reminds me of one of the fish tanks I have back home. This is the first time I've ever done a tank with real life plants, and as I've come to learn is common, we have an algae bloom that I just can't seem to get under control. I keep pulling it out, I treat it with chemicals, and it just keeps coming back. It won't quit!

That is what the mustard plant is like to farmers listening to Jesus' teaching. It's a pain to get rid of. This is what Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to?

And then he says "the birds of the air" are going to nest in this plant. The phrase "the birds of the air" was actually a euphemism back in the day for Gentiles. It was a stand in specifically for those who were on the outside looking in. Those are the people who get to enjoy the expanding Kingdom of Heaven? Not the people of Israel? Not God's chosen? But specifically those who weren't chosen?

Like I said, this track is a heavy hitter. Jesus' first audience would have been clenching their fists a little bit at this teaching. It would have knocked them off balance.

So the takeaway from this track: The Kingdom is subversive, hard to contain, and exists for the benefit of others.

Have you ever seen someone do something under the radar specifically to help someone else? Maybe they gave a gift that they didn't want anyone else to know about. Maybe they bought a meal for a homeless person, just because. Maybe they gave up their own privileged place in the world so that someone else could climb the ladder a bit. Those...those are the moments that Jesus points to and says "That's what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like."

Track Three- The follow up: Yeast.

Jesus chooses here to hit the same message again on his mixtape, but with a slightly different flavor of track.

If you were a first century Jew listening to Jesus, the mention of the word "yeast" would have raise your eyebrows. That's a word that comes dripping with religious meaning. In Exodus 13, Moses says "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory."

Maybe living in the Kingdom is sometimes at odds with our religious traditions? Whatever the Kingdom of Heaven is, it surely isn't "do everything your religious institution tells you." It's not "the church is always right." It's not "the only place to find God is in a sanctuary like this one." It's not "whatever the pastor says, goes." (Ok, sometimes it's that one...but still...)

We actually miss a little bit too here with our English translation. The word for “mixed in” in Greek is the word *krypto*, like cryptic. This woman didn’t gently mix in the yeast to the dough. She hid it in the dough. It’s a secret. It’s a surprise. It’s subversive. Once again, it’s small, and if it gets hidden in there, good luck ever getting it back out.

This is interesting, because if I’m thinking about both of these stories back to back, they’re not what I frequently think about with the Kingdom of Heaven. Often we think of the Kingdom as big, and flashy, and showy, and majestic, where a beautiful orchestra plays just off in the distance while we watch the sunrise...

But Jesus says this is different. It’s down to earth. It’s small. It’s hidden. It’s not always easy to spot. But once it gets loose in the world, good luck ever getting it back under control.

The takeaway from this track: the Kingdom is subversive, hiding in plain sight, and sometimes pushes against cold religion.

This isn’t to say that the Kingdom is against religion, it’s just that the Kingdom will never let religion get in the way of its outreach. You can’t contain it in the walls of a sanctuary or the pages of a tradition. It’s going to break free from all of that.

Tracks Four and Five: Treasures.

These two are so similar, I want to treat them together, because I had a conversation a while ago that changed forever how I look at these two parables.

I grew up understanding the parable this way: when you come across the Kingdom of Heaven, when you find Jesus, you should give up everything you have, stop having fun immediately, and sell out for the Kingdom of God. To be sure, there are times where this isn't the worst interpretation. There are times where a bit of sacrifice on our part goes a long way to building the Kingdom. But, there's another interpretation out there.

Imagine Jesus, the Son of God, went walking through a field, and he found humanity. He found a creation that he was deeply in love with. It was like a treasure of great price, completely invaluable. And so in his joy, Jesus gave up everything he had and bought the field. He literally gave up his life to buy us back.

Maybe these two tracks aren't so much about what we do for the Kingdom. Maybe these tracks are about what the Kingdom does for us? Maybe the takeaway from this track is that you are part of the Kingdom because Jesus says you are, because Jesus gives you worth, not because you made anything happen.

Track six- One of these things is not like the others: Bad fish.

Which, by the way, if there were an alternate title for this sermon, it would be “Bad Fish.”

Jesus imagines the Kingdom as a big net, big enough for everything and every one. This would have been as offensive to them as I think it is to us today. The net of the Kingdom is big enough to catch the people who look exactly like us, right along with those who look nothing like us. The net of the Kingdom is big enough for Ukrainians and Russians. The net of the Kingdom is big enough for folks who watch CNN and folks who watch Fox News. The net of the Kingdom is big enough for folks who are sure they belong in the Kingdom, and for folks who are just as convinced they don't.

But, just because everything gets caught in the net, doesn't mean everything belongs to the Kingdom. Some of the fish is really great, and worthy of the Kingdom. And some things, well, some things are bad fish. Hatred is bad fish. Greed is bad fish. Exclusion is bad fish.

The takeaway from this track: Maybe let's not wait of the angels to get rid of the bad fish. There are, it turns out, rather toxic people in the world. The teacher in Proverbs puts this in a harsh, but rather stark kind of way: “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly.” There are toxic people, in other words, who are going to keep coming back to their foolish ways. People who traffic in hatred and call it love. People who build their lives around greed and oppressing others to get ahead. People who exclude everyone who doesn't look like them, think like them, believe like them.

To be sure, we hope for redemption for those folks, that they would learn to repent of their ways. But...maybe we should beat the angels to it and get rid of the bad fish?

Because of a chronic inability to say “no,” I am on the board for the boys’ dek hockey program. After a recent tournament, someone from another team started posting up a storm on Facebook (the source of all high-minded debate in our world) about one of our teams and accusing them of cheating and all kinds of negative stuff. Naturally, one of our board members was livid, and telling us so in our group chat.

However, there’s this other guy on the board, and I want to be just like him when I grow up. He’s got that wisdom, the kind that comes from having seen a few things. He saw the livid member of our board at the dek this weekend, put his hand on her shoulder and said “this absolutely isn’t worth your time. Don’t give it any.”

I don’t know about you, but I don’t have any time for bad fish any more. I don’t have time for negativity online. I don’t have time for partisan food fights. I don’t have time for making other people feel “less than” just because of who they are. I don’t have time for letting hatred, or greed, or envy get a foot hold in my world.

Instead, I want to make time. I want to make time for small, insignificant acts of kindness for others that have a tendency to spread like weeds. I want to make time for hiding the power of grace and forgiveness in a world that won’t know it’s there until it’s too late. I want to make time for sitting in wonder that

the Son of God sold everything he had to buy this field. And I hope you do too.

So may you live as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven in the here and now. May you see that even the smallest of deeds can grow like weeds, and work for the benefit of others. May you see that the Kingdom of Heaven simply won't be contained within the walls of a religious tradition. Maybe you give bad fish absolutely no time in your days. May you always remember that you are a treasure of great price, worthy enough that the Son of God bought the whole field just to have you. And may you play this mixtape on repeat, until the songs get stuck in your head and your heart.

Thanks be to God! Amen.



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