

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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I Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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It is a strange time in DaySpring's life, isn't it? We've been in a time of transition for a while now, and we eagerly await whom God will bring to serve as pastor. Then last week we said goodbye to Chris and Jessie, who provided leadership for so long. And that is just the beginning. This summer we have said, and soon will say, goodbye to many other folks who have been part of DaySpring for some time. Tomorrow I take my leave of this place, ending six years in Waco, four and a half of which were spent at DaySpring. Hard to believe.

It is not easy to be a sending church. It can seem as though friendships come with expiration dates as people come and go. But this hard work of sending is an essential part of who we are. When we gather around the cow trough and celebrate the first act of the journey of faith, we recite the Nicene Creed, the consensus statement of the early church about the essential truths of the faith. We proclaim that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...one God. But we also confess some things about what the church is. We say together that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Scary words...but they don't need to be. We are saying that the church is *one*—despite all the divisions we see in the church, Christ came to form us into the Body of Christ—each one of us is a part of it. That body was created to be *holy*—transformed by grace into Christ-likeness. The church is also *catholic*, or universal. We confess that the whole world is the Lord's, and though we have been given this plot of ground at 7900 Renewal Way to plow and tend—the field is God's. There is no room for egoism, pride, or the narrowness that would shut out the other. But, beyond being one, holy and catholic, the church is also *apostolic*. Part of that is to say that we proclaim the same message as the apostles, those “sent ones” who proclaimed the gospel of Christ crucified and the world redeemed. But, being apostolic means more than just preaching the same message. It also means that just as the apostles were sent, so we also send others to go and tell. So when we say goodbye—when we do the hard work of friendship on a timeline—we can count it as part of the challenge and sacrifice that comes with being the Church in God's world.

On behalf of those who are leaving, I say “thank you.” Thanks for being my church family. Thanks for making it possible for me to say that I feel sent. All of us who go out from this place thank you. Pray for us that we would find places to serve and places where we might find the same loving community that we have found here at DaySpring.

As you can tell, it's tough not to be nostalgic on a day like today. But, I do want to acknowledge a few things about DaySpring that need to be said every so often. We are being profoundly shaped by so many things...practices that can escape our notice...*practices that fit us for life in the kingdom.*

- We hear the chiming of the hour and we find ourselves preparing ourselves worship.
- We hear someone say “Lift up your hearts” and without even seeing the bold print we reflexively respond “we lift them up to the Lord.”
- We wrestle with the silent moments that we encounter in Sunday worship and Wednesday contemplative prayer and we slowly find ourselves learning to be still and know who is God...and who is not.
- In lectio divina we try to listen closer each time we hear the passage of scripture read and we grow in the discipline of listening for God's voice.
- We celebrate communion and we can say amen with thanksgiving when we are given the “bread of life” and the “cup of our salvation.”

- We listen to the sermon with the intent of being caught up into the story, and ultimately, into the ongoing drama of redemption.
- Over time we learn to track with the rhythms of the Christian year, following cycles of feasting and fasting, of preparation and celebration, that constitute the Christian life.
- Each week we hear an Old Testament passage, a Psalm, an Epistle, and a passage from the Gospels, and in response to this word of the Lord for God's people each week we say "thanks be to God."
- And each Friday before the message is preached we gather around coffee and croissants and we discuss how these passages from the lectionary fit together and what we see God up to in the text.

Amazing isn't it, the million little ways that God shapes us? For me, that last one—learning to think with the lectionary—has been one of the most formative parts of my DaySpring experience. Every week I watch in amazement as text plays off of text. It is a beautiful thing.

And this morning we have heard three texts that each present a different angle on life in the kingdom of God. All three speak beautifully to us right here, right now, as we contemplate our future as a church, and our own participation in the Kingdom.

In our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings we see a young prince Solomon shortly after David's death, ready to assume his father's throne. He knows how heavily the crown will weigh on his head; he knows how great is the task before him. And when God shows up in a dream saying, "Ask what I shall give you," somehow in that moment Solomon gets it right. With bold humility he confesses that he has no idea how to carry out the task he has been given and he is going to need God's wisdom. He avoids the temptations that would have been so easy. He could have responded in fear and despair, asking God to get another person for the job. That was Moses' mistake. Or he could have followed the proud conventional wisdom of the politically minded: "fake it 'til you make it...Project confidence, Solomon, and people will follow. Go out and win friends and influence people. Show them you're a chip off the old block. Ask God for a treasury full of gold and wow them with your wealth and power." But instead, shunning both cowardice and bravado, Solomon accepts the task with humility and asks for wisdom. In effect he is saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." O, that we would all answer so well.

Solomon models the kind of *humility* necessary for life in the kingdom. But in today's reading from Romans, Paul explains the source of our *confidence*. He reminds us that the Spirit helps us pray when we don't know how. He jogs our memory about the nature of salvation, saying, "this is really God's work...and we have the privilege to participate in the good things that God is already doing." Paul says that in all of these things, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." In this kingdom there is power and there is conquering, but its source is love and its goal is union with God. Powerful words. Words that infuse Christ-like humility with Christ-like confidence, secure in God's loving intent toward us.

But then we come to the Gospel passage and we again bump into the strange new world of the parables... parables that reveal the mystery of the Kingdom. And we see Jesus telling seemingly harmless stories about farming and baking and buried treasure...and somehow these stories upend our world, if we'll let them.

Jesus leads off with a doozy, saying: "You know this kingdom I am preaching about, it's a lot like a mustard seed. This tiny seed becomes the biggest of the garden shrubs...in fact, it becomes a tree and the birds take refuge and nest in it."

I often wonder how the crowd heard that parable...

I imagine an older couple...a mustard farmer and his wife. The farmer upon hearing the parable says to her, "Small seed? OK. A great shrub? Sure—it practically becomes a thicket and sometimes it gets taller than me. But a tree? Come on. This Rabbi's never been to a farm. I've seen mustard, and I've seen trees, and mustard ain't a tree!" He was proud of his logical deduction.

His wife, who takes time to read the scriptures (and reminds him of the fact regularly) hears something entirely different. She replies, "Of course not! He's being ironic."

"Ironic?"

"Yeah, ironic. Mustard ain't a tree. That's the point. Think about Rome. Think about Persia. Do they remind you of a mighty oak tree, or a field of mustard?"

The farmer feels like a trap is being set, but he reluctantly ventures a reply, "An oak tree, I suppose..."

"OK, then. He is saying his kingdom is not like that. It's mustard."

"But he said it's a tree!"

"Yeah, and he got you thinking about what *his* kingdom is like, didn't he?"

The farmer went away grumbling, because his wife and that rabbi both managed to pull a switcheroo on him. This "switcheroo" happened to me a few years ago when I was touring the Holy Land with Fuller Seminary. I will never forget coming out of the church that is built atop the Mount of Transfiguration and out of a crack in the rock wall around the church there was a scraggly plant growing. I asked the tour guide what this little yellow wildflower was, and he said "oh, that is mustard." Mustard! I thought, "That can't be mustard...mustard grows into a redwood tree. Jesus said so! This looks more like a wildflower, a weed."

That is Jesus for you. He tells a story that switches everything around on us. He tells us that his kingdom is a mighty tree...like the mustard plant. Welcome to the upside-down kingdom where the accepted rules about "how things work" are all turned on their head and proven hollow. The kingdom is not like Caesar's...built with armies and wealth. It starts tiny like a mustard seed. It grows improbably strong and full like a great crop. It pops up in unexpected places like a weed. That's the Kingdom...

Jesus continues on. Now he says that the kingdom is like the yeast in a batch of dough. Before you know it, the yeast has worked its way through, enlivening the whole lump. Such a small part completely determines the fate of the whole. That's the kingdom...

Jesus goes on offering parable after parable, giving us several images to help us get it...images that force us to contemplate further the meaning of all this Kingdom talk. In all of these stories of wheat and tares, dough and yeast, mustard seeds and trees, Jesus seems to be saying that life in the Kingdom, at least in part, is about contemplating life in the kingdom, allowing the upside down kingdom to turn our kingdoms on their heads.

But he doesn't stop there, just challenging us to think harder. Eventually, his tone shifts. He says, "You know, the kingdom is also like a guy who finds a treasure in a field, so he sells everything and buys the field so he can have the treasure. Or it is like a pearl merchant who chances upon the most exquisite pearl of his career...so he sells everything and buys it." Evidently the kingdom is not just something to be considered, but also something to be bought.

Did you notice that the guy who finds the treasure in the field buries it again and then buys the field? No one gets to walk off with the treasure tucked under his tunic. The treasure, the kingdom of God, will not be had on the cheap. It will cost you all you have. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he flatly rejected the "cheap grace" that we bestow on ourselves, saying instead "when Christ calls a person He bids them to come and die." Of course, the paradox is, if we sell all and follow him we find real treasure. If we heed the call to come and die, we find real life. That's the kingdom...

How about this detail...Did you happen to notice that the one who finds the pearl is a merchant? This is one who has made a life of looking for pearls, one who knows a real treasure when he sees one. And once he sees this pearl he sells *everything* in order to buy it. Imagine that. A merchant liquidates his entire inventory to buy one item. Maybe this is just a shrewd deal. Maybe he knows that he can sell it for a huge profit. But I don't know about that. Could a pearl merchant who has found the pearl of a lifetime ever part with it? Could anyone offer him enough cash to convince him to let loose of such treasure? Maybe this is what is going on when at some point in his ministry followers start leaving Jesus, and Jesus asks the Twelve if they will desert him too. Peter responds "to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." He has found the pearl...and now the bargain basement fakes won't do.

Jesus not only comes preaching a more interesting idea, a kingdom worth pondering—he calls for response. He says: "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest. But you are going to have to come. If you drink the water I have to give, you'll never thirst again. But you are going to have to drink. Ask, seek, knock...you'll find."

Underneath his words of love, and even underneath his words of judgment, there is a longing and an urgency in the appeal. You hear it in his final trip through Jerusalem when he looks over the city and weeps: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

His desire is that we be part of his kingdom, that we would constitute his Body, the body of Christ. He calls us to gather at the table and break the bread of life. He desires that we be a community founded on the humble search for wisdom and sustained by the confidence that that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is his call, that is his desire, and that is where all these maddening parables of the kingdom are headed.

I hope it is ok if I meddle for a bit and ask some uncomfortable questions. What must you sell in order to buy the field? Has the kingdom of God become a precious pearl for you yet? Has the kingdom yet captivated you so that nothing else will do? To be part of this kingdom, are you willing to become mustard or leaven—small and insignificant—or do you still cling to the logic of greatness, empire, and acquisition?

These are scary questions to me because they remind me of how far I fall short. But my parting gift to you is a very old prayer that has given me much peace:

LORD Jesus Christ,
take all my freedom,
my memory, my understanding, and my will.
All that I have and cherish Thou hast given me.
I surrender it all to be guided by Thy will.
Thy grace and Thy love are wealth enough for me.
Give me these Lord Jesus and I ask for nothing more.
Amen.