

“Condiments of the Kingdom”
Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52
Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey
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A few weeks ago, Abbie and I had some friends over for a BBQ. I was tasked with going to the grocery store to get a few items that we needed. One of the items on the list was condiments, namely ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise.

As I made my way down the condiment aisle, I found myself paying special attention to all of the different condiments. Prior to that moment, I guess I had never really noticed just how many different types and varieties of condiments there really are. When I initially made the turn down the aisle, it had been my original intent to simply buy your basic and standard ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise.

However, in that moment I began to feel anxious. I panicked. I began to question myself. I know what kind of condiments I like for burgers and hot dogs, but what do others like?

Should I get the spicy mustard? Maybe I should get Grey Poupon, then our friends will think we're fancy!

Oh look, Habanero ketchup?! – That might be a nice change! It would certainly add a little “kick” to our party!

Kraft mayonnaise or Hellman's? Wait! There's mayonnaise with Olive Oil in it?!

Oh look, Worcestershire sauce – My mom always adds that to her burgers for taste before she cooks them, should I get some?!

Well, in the end, I chose the traditional route, buying the basic, store-brand varieties of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise, but I certainly left the grocery store feeling unsure about my decision.

I suppose this anxiety comes from the reality that it has been my experience that condiments are a lot like faith, they are a very personal experience.

Some people, like my Uncle Bill, hate mayonnaise. Others, like myself, would eat mayonnaise sandwiches every day.

Some people, like our oldest daughter Ella, love ketchup, dipping just about anything – even fruit snacks – in it.

Some people, like my wife, commit the world's gravest sin and ask for A1 sauce for her steak no matter where we are.

So, when Jesus begins his teaching today with a parable about a mustard seed, I found myself feeling a bit anxious. It's not enough for Jesus to teach through ancient and cryptic riddles, but Jesus now must add another layer, spreading on the mustard thick and heavy.

As far as parables go, our passage today could be considered to be some sort of deluxe burger, the condiments have been carefully crafted, the bun is thick and fluffy, the finest meat has been chosen, and the fields and the farmer's markets have been searched for the freshest vegetables.

This kind of parabolic variety can leave us feeling as overwhelming as choosing between regular mustard and spicy mustard.

So, then what exactly are we to do with these parables?

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind..."

If we're being honest, the "kingdom of heaven" seems like a peculiar thing. In fact, it seems like a variety of peculiar things that do not quite match up. Finding the correlation between a mustard seed and a fishing net seems like an impossible task.

Perhaps the first problem arises for us with this somewhat peculiar phrase - "the kingdom of heaven." This phrase can be daunting and intimidating. It feels, in many ways, as if this "kingdom of heaven" is some alternative and nearly unattainable universe, a realm where God's rule reigns supreme and we are simply left waiting and hoping that we'll get an invite to the kingdom.

Then we have the instruments of this kingdom - A mustard seed. Yeast. Hidden treasure. Pearls. A fishing net. These don't really add up to what we might assume equate to the "kingdom of heaven." I'd imagine that the crowds and disciples were equally disappointed.

Where are the kings or, at the very least, a prominent prince? What about the military generals? Why not an emperor or some powerful ruler? How about some gold and silver? Maybe even an elaborate feast?

The Rev. Talitha Arnold, who has been the pastor of the United Church of Santa Fe since 1987, offers this reflection on these particular parables:

...the stories that Jesus tells of his kingdom and that of heaven are down to earth, literally. They are common stories about ordinary

people – a tenant farmer, a housewife, fishermen – doing everyday things...Of course, that is the whole point. As Christians, we are called to believe in the incarnation, the mystery of the meeting of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. In his parables, Jesus puts that incarnational focus not on himself but on the world around him. “The kingdom of [heaven] is like” the most common things in human life. Like Jesus himself, this everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of divine and human, if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.¹

This kingdom of heaven – Jesus is saying – is not some far away fantasy. It’s not some kingdom up in the clouds, but it is a kingdom that is current. The kingdom, though not yet fully realized, is, nevertheless, in the here and in the now, arriving, most especially, in small, simple, and unassuming ways.

One of my favorite classes in seminary was a course titled “The Parables: Exegesis and Preaching.” It was a course that focused entirely on the parables. One day during class, near the end of a lecture, our professor asked us to get out a piece of paper and something to write with. He explained that he was going to give us fifteen minutes to come up with our own parable. The only stipulation was that the parable had to begin with “The kingdom of heaven is like...” After fifteen minutes, we all came back into the classroom. One-by-one we read our parables, each of us offering a unique and personal expression of how the kingdom of heaven had been experienced in our respective lives.

It was a beautiful display of the way in which the kingdom of heaven is comprised primarily of the condiments of current lives, working in and through each of us, arriving in unanticipated ways and in unexpected places.

Whether we always recognize it or not, we all experience these kingdom moments.

On Friday, my sister and her boyfriend had to unexpectedly put down one of their dogs, Bailey, due to complications resulting from fluid in his lungs and heart. It was, and continues to be, a very painful reality. Bailey was their beloved fur baby. As they have been processing what happened, my sister has been providing me with updates and letting me know how they’re doing and how they’re feeling via text message.

Yesterday afternoon I got a text message from my sister. I assumed it was another update. Instead, it was a picture of a small mug that Ella, our oldest daughter, uses to “drink coffee” with her Aunt Biff when my sister helps to watch her. Ella had apparently snuck her coffee mug into my sister’s purse the other day.

¹ Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. III, 285-286.

That innocent action, that child-sized mug placed in the purse of Aunt Biff was, in my mind, an undeniable condiment of the kingdom. It was a simple and unassuming expression of the kingdom of heaven, a much-needed laugh and a reminder that the kingdom of heaven – God's presence made manifest in the present – is often most readily experienced in the daily rhythms and routines of life.

Now, taking a cue from my seminary professor, I close today with a challenge to each of us.

Spend time this week taking note of those kingdom moments in your own life. Where and how is the kingdom of heaven being realized in your present life? From these moments take time to compose your own parables, expressing the small and simple ways in which God's presence is being made known to you in the here and now.

Thanks be to God for a kingdom of simple and unseen. Amen.