

Thank you for the opportunity of worshipping with you today, and special thanks to Shelby for the invitation to preach. It is so good to worship as the full communion partners that The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are and have been since early 2001. As the Psalmist sang, “How good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in peace.”

The gospel text read in our and many other churches today is a collection of parables Jesus told concerning the reign of God. I love the parables. One of the things I love about them is that while each one tends to make a single pithy, succinct point, they are also wonderfully open-ended, lending themselves to multiple interpretations (and, not coincidentally, resisting narrow, dogmatic literal interpretations).

Not limiting ourselves to merely one interpretation, we can be like the character Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. If you're familiar with the play or movie, you may recall the scene in which Tevye and some of his friends converse about world events. One of them says, “Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let them break their own heads” to which Tevye replies, “He’s right. As the Good Book says, ‘If you spit in the air, it lands in your face.’” Another friend disagrees, saying, “That’s nonsense. You can’t close your eyes to what’s happening in the world.” And Tevye says, “He’s right.” A third friend says, “He’s right and he’s right? How can they both be right?” And Tevye says, “You know, you’re also right.”

So: let’s allow our religious imaginations to run unfettered this morning, and see where these first two parables of mustard seed and yeast take us. Maybe we can be like the scribes Jesus mentioned: the ones “trained for the kingdom of heaven” who bring out from the treasury of biblical wisdom “what is new and what is old.”

Jesus is not above using a bit of hyperbole when he calls the mustard seed “the smallest of all the seeds” or tells his hearers that the mustard plant grows into a tree. There were definitely smaller seeds and larger shrubs in First Century Palestine. But let’s not get too deep in those literary weeds. The mustard seed is still smaller than a peach pit, and the mustard plant taller than brussels sprouts¹. Point taken. Let’s move on.

When you and I hear this parable, we often conflate it with another of Jesus’ sayings a few chapters later in Matthew’s gospel: “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move...” That saying has to do with *our faith*; this parable has to do with *God’s kingdom*. Same church; different pew.

This parable points to (1) the hiddenness of the kingdom at its sowing, and (2) the luxurious exuberance of the resulting plant.

Consider these two points in reverse order: When and where the reign of God is manifest in all its fullness, then and there we and all people and the whole creation experience the peace and good will, harmony and unity, wellness and wholeness that are part of that wonderful biblical concept *shalom*. A favorite Christmas carol reminds us that the reign of God is not a place up in the sky somewhere, but a time:

*When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and all the earth give back the song which now the angels sing.*

Where are the seeds of this heavenly reign sown? And in what are they hidden, like a mustard seed in the soil? And when were they sown?

- When God laid the foundations of the earth;
- When God spoke a Word, and called into being a universe that did not previously exist;
- When God gave the Word of Torah, of law and instruction, to Moses and the people of Israel;
- When the prophets thundered forth God's Word, recalling God's mighty acts and calling God's people to seek justice and love mercy;
- When the Word became flesh in a baby born in a backwater burg called Bethlehem;
- When that Word was hanged upon a cross, his arms outstretched in a love that embraces all, with no exceptions;
- When our spirits sink and words fail us because of the evil that is all around us and the Spirit intercedes for us – as St. Paul said in today's second lesson – “with sighs too deep for words;”
- When the Word enkindles in us the flame of faith that clings in hope to God's unconditional promises and love.

That's when and where and in what and in whom the seeds of God's reign are sown.

To state the painfully obvious, you and I do not yet live in the fullness of God's promised kingdom. One glance at the evening news makes that all too clear. But in Christ we can discern the contours of that kingdom, and begin even now to live as its faithful citizens. While we do not build or create God's reign, as God's faithful people, we can offer the world glimpses of its inbreaking. Muslims, Jews and Christians breaking bread together and learning about and from one another as you and others are doing through the Know Your Neighbor program provides just such a glimpse to a community and a nation too often diminished, its spirit corrupted, by suspicion, resentment or hatred. Another hymn puts it this way:

*For not with swords loud clashing,
Nor roll of stirring drums;
But deeds of love and mercy
The heav'nly kingdom comes.*



The parable of the leaven takes us in a direction that is at once both similar to and different from the mustard seed parable.

- Both are about the reign of God.
- Both are about that reign's hiddenness – a seed hidden in soil and yeast hidden in flour.
- And both are about that reign's exuberance – a shrub that grows as big as a tree, and enough dough to make a hundred loaves of bread.

That last detail is easily lost on us. I don't know what “three measures of flour” is any more than I know what three shekels are worth. But those who *do* know about such things tell us that it was roughly a bushel of flour, 128 cups; 16 five-pound bags. Mix in 40 or so cups of water, and

you've got a lump of dough weighing roughly the same as a Great Dane. Try kneading *that* all at once! Which is part of the point: we can't. But God the baker can. (And note, please, that the role of God in this parable is played by a woman.)

God the baker mixes in – that is to say *hides* – the yeast in the bushel of flour and leavens not part of it, but the whole of it. “All of it,” the parable says, is leavened. Which is another way of saying that no part of the world that God created and sustains in love is unleavened. The leavened dough is not just the church, or still less certain denominations of the church; it is not just some nations or peoples; not just some races or ethnicities, not just some sexualities or genders or gender identities, but *all* the world. God the baker in this parable has got the whole lump of dough, not just some of it. To paraphrase the old spiritual: The Divine Woman baker's got the whole world in her hands. And just as the seed-in-the-soil is hidden now but soon to be made manifest, so also is the yeast-in-the-dough hidden now, but leavening the whole Great Dane-sized loaf.

All evidence to the contrary, these two parables are telling us, the reign of God is at work even now, as hidden and mysterious as a shrub emerging from a tiny seed and bread from the heady, yeasty, fermenting power of the leaven.

Just so, the leavening power of God's Word is mixed into the “lump of our existenceⁱⁱ” and each of us is raised by that Word of love that operates in us but is not dependent on us.

God knows the journey remains a challenging one; that it is difficult to believe that – all evidence to the contrary – the seed *is* growing and the loaf *is* rising. God knows our faith needs sustenance or it grows weak and enfeebled. So God breaks off a chunk of that loaf in advance and feeds us with it even now, bread for the journey, food for the road, a foretaste of the feast to come: The body of Christ – the bread of heaven. Word made flesh. Flesh made bread. What is there to do but this? Take and eat.

Amen.

ⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Eerdmans, 1985, p. 117.

ⁱⁱ Capon, p. 123.