

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 “Wicked is as Wicked Does”

You’ve got this big section in Matthew 13 where Jesus is teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. He was using stories to help his disciples understand what the Kingdom of Heaven would be like and how it would be different from the Kingdoms of earth. Back at the beginning of the chapter his disciples asked, “But why use parables?” Jesus said, “Because I know you as my followers will understand them. Anyone else? Probably not. But if others do hear them and get them? Great. The more people who get it, the better.” So we’ve got two parables on our plates today to answer this question, “What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?” One says it’s like a mustard seed that someone planted in a field. It’s the smallest of seeds, yet when it grows it became a huge plant where birds nest! The other says it’s like yeast that some women took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast worked its way through all the dough.

So here’s our question. What in the world do all these parables in chapter 13 have in common? I think in some way, shape, or form, all of these parables say, “The Kingdom of Heaven is *not* what you think it is.” It’s unexpected. It’s unpredictable. Or maybe it is predictable, but only in its unpredictability. So let’s deal with the two that Peggy read this morning. The Kingdom of Heaven is like mustard seed and yeast. Alright ... mustard seed. When you stop and think about it, this is a *really* weird comparison. First of all, why would someone plant something so invasive in a field where you’re *supposed* to plant a harvestable crop? It’s like saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like planting dandelions in your front lawn.” It makes no sense! It’s disruptive. It’s messy. Most people don’t want dandelions in their yard!

Same thing with the Parable of the Yeast – You’ve got these women *intentionally hiding* yeast in a bushel of wheat. And they’re doing this on the sly *knowing* that the yeast will take over and disrupt the wheat. Now you bakers out there might be thinking, “Okay, but I put yeast in my bread. Shoot, I have to be careful not to kill my yeast or else my

bread won't rise." But remember, bread in Middle Eastern culture even today is mostly unleavened. Think pita bread. Flat bread. People who are trying to make flat bread *don't* want yeast. But these women are going around *hiding* yeast in wheat! Sounds like they're pulling a prank on someone.

So the common thread ... the common message in these parables is that the Kingdom of Heaven *disrupts things*. It messes with what we think or expect or have even been taught to believe is "normal." And it's complicated too! You can't explain the Kingdom of Heaven in a 140 character Tweet that's for sure. And it's funny that when Jesus finishes telling the disciples these parables he asks them, "Do you understand all of these things I'm saying?" And they say "Uh ... yes?" You fibbers! You disciples are like the kids in science class who pass notes all period and then when the teacher says, "Okay, do you all understand what I've said?" you say, "Uh ... yes?" But the truth *comes out* when something blows up in the lab. See, we've read ahead and we know darn well these disciples *really* didn't get it. Shoot, 2,000 years later and we who are supposed to be the ambassadors of God's reign here on earth ... some of us who even formally call ourselves Disciples, *still* don't fully get it. But that's why we're here. We're going to try to figure this out together. Aren't you glad you came to church today?

One of the challenges of trying to follow Jesus is understanding that the values he teaches are often at odds with the accepted social conventions of the world around us. Sometimes they're seen as socially disruptive and disrespectful. And this makes sense. There were some bad things going on back in Jesus' time. You had a long line of power-hungry emperors in Rome who worked very hard to make sure people towed the line and knew who was boss. They did this by making sure the commoners stayed poor and humble while rewarding the aristocrats for helping to keep them this way. This is how they expanded the empire and stayed in power. The emperor during Jesus' time was Tiberius Caesar, and yeah ... Jesus had a lot to say about how God's reign was radically different than that of Tiberius, especially when it came to

treating the poor. But these “reign of God” values can also be seen as sinful and evil.

Now wait ... what? Why would this be the case? These are religious teachings. These are religious values. Wouldn't the religious *leaders* be all about religious *values*? You'd think. But Jesus heaped a lot of criticism on the religious leaders who got a little too cozy with Caesar. One of the tricks Rome used to keep order in the territories was allowing people to practice their religion. That is *if* they had a clear understanding that their first allegiance was to the Empire. So Rome would make deals with the religious leaders in these territories. “You keep *your* folks out of *our* hair, and we'll stay out of yours.” So in this region back in Jesus' day, Rome made their deal with the Herodians. The Herodians were a family dynasty of “Hellenistic Jews” which is just a fancy way of saying, “Jews who *really* bought into Greek and Roman culture and not always in healthy ways.” The writers of the New Testament most often referred to them as “The Scribes and the Pharisees.” So how do you think these religious leaders responded to Jesus when he called them things like “white-washed tombs” who were more interested in giving the *appearance* of being religious rather than actually following God? Or “snakes” who were willing to help Rome keep order by oppressing the poor? Not favorably, I'll tell you that. In fact, in the end, Jesus was executed because of a cooperative effort between the agents of Caesar and the agents of Herod. Jesus, in the eyes of the agents of Herod was *not* a good Jew. In fact, he was considered a heretic ... unworthy to even be called a “Jew.” All because he said, “I represent the Kingdom of Heaven ... the Reign of God ... which is *nothing* like the Reign of Caesar and Herod. And buddy, let me tell you, this Kingdom of Heaven is going to come in like a pesky mustard plant and ruin this field ... it's going to come in like a handful of yeast that is going to ruin the batch of flat bread you wanted to make. Here's the thing though ... these things will look bad to the folks who don't get it. But birds are going to be able to seek shelter in this wild, crazy mustard-infested field. And you're going to be able to feed a lot more people with this the big, fluffy bread you'll be making. The Kingdom of

Heaven is unpredictable. It's messy. It's disruptive. Now do you get it?
"Uhh ... yes?"

Here's an historical observation. Any time secular rulers get too cozy with religious leaders *or* when religious leaders get too cozy with secular leaders, bad things happen. Maybe in countries that elect their leaders democratically, the secular rulers will say, "You know, in order for us to get power or stay in power, we need to find some way to get these religious folks' to vote for us." So these leaders throw out some bones and promise to do things that are near and dear to religious folks' heart even though these leaders may have never set foot in a church in their life. And it shows. And on the other side of that, religious leaders might want somebody in power to push their agenda, so they'll go out and court these secular leaders and promise them votes in return for favors.

Here's another historical observation. Whenever this happens ... no matter what side you're on ... religious or secular ... every time this happens a prophetic voice arises. In the Old Testament it was prophets like Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah and Micah. They would come out and confront the religious and secular leaders. They'd call them out on their wickedness. In the New Testament, it was Jesus and the Apostles who rose up and did the same. The leaders ... the Herods and the Caesars would be like, "Are you calling *us* wicked?!" And the prophetic voices answered – "Well ... wicked is as wicked does. So ... yeah." And again, this has happened on multiple occasions throughout history. An unholy alliance between sacred and secular, religious and political would arise and a voice ... sometimes many voices would rise up and say, "This is wrong. This is not of God. And this needs to stop *now*." Well how do you know if something is of God or not of God? The Old Testament prophets said, "When there is the presence of justice and mercy because the people are walking *humbly* with God." Jesus said, "When good news is proclaimed ... when the hungry are fed, when the blind are given sight, and when prisoners are set free." Paul said, "When the fruit of the spirit is present ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control."

When the Nazis came into power in Germany, there was an unholy alliance between church and state that resulted in the persecution, imprisonment, and death of six million Jews. When you read some of the German theologians of the time, what they wrote about Jews was shocking. In extreme cases, the Jews were referred to as “Christ-killers.” So when the Nazis started actively persecuting the Jews, there were a number of Christian leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who used their prophetic voices to say, “This is wrong.” How’d that go over with the secular government? Not so well. How did that go over with a huge number of churches who supported the Nazi’s agenda? Bonhoeffer was labeled a bad Christian by many. Some didn’t think he was a Christian at all. And like many other prophetic voices throughout history who called church and state out for their wickedness, he was executed.

The author of Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom literature in the Old Testament writes, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” In other words, history repeats itself. Church ... if we are not using our prophetic voice to call out that which is wicked ... be it church or state ... we are not doing our job. And church ... sometimes when you use that prophetic voice to call out wickedness, you’re going to get some heat from the state. No surprise there. But you’re going to raise the ire of the religious leaders who have forged wicked alliances with state. You may be accused of being a bad Christian, or no Christian at all. That’s the way it has been, and that is the way it is. Prophets don’t win popularity contests. But let me tell you, sometimes when you are accused of being a bad Christian or no Christian at all simply for proclaiming the good news of Jesus ... well ... let’s just say depending on who the accusers are, sometimes their disapproval is like a gold star.

Church ... there’s a lot of wickedness going on in the world today. Let’s be the pesky mustard bush that ruins the field in which wickedness is sown. A lot of birds will be grateful for the shelter and safety.