

The kingdom of Caesar is a like a virus that incubates in one body and then circulates out to infect the world.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a baby growing in a mother's womb; first he is too small to see, but then he grows and fills his mother with life.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus presents us with a host of parables, too many to address in one sermon. Today I want to talk with you about the so-called "parables of growth," but I encourage you to meditate on the other parables throughout the week—they're worth your time!

The parables of growth go like this:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

In both of these parables, we hear about things that start small and increase. The mustard seed turns into a mustard plant; the yeast turns into dough. But as with all of Jesus' parables, there's a twist. Did you notice? I confess I didn't the first time I read them. The mustard plant is a shrub; but in this parable, Jesus says that it comes to surpass shrub status and become a full-on tree! As for the yeast, the woman adds, not just a few cups of flour, but three measures—that's *sixty pounds* of flour, enough for 100 loaves of bread!

Jesus uses these parables of growth to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, arguing that the Kingdom of Heaven starts off small, almost insignificantly so, but grows to such an enormous size that it becomes full of abundance and impossible to miss.

All of Jesus' parables today are about the Kingdom of Heaven. So what exactly is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew calls it, or the Kingdom of God, as Mark and Luke call it, might be better translated as the Reign of God. The word that we translate as kingdom is *basileia* (βασιλεία) and it refers more to the rule of a king than to a kingdom. The word kingdom implies territory, boundaries, a specific place. Reign, on the other hand, implies an event, an act of ruling, an ongoing period of governance.

When Jesus talks about the coming kingdom, he's not talking about a new nation with borders and boundaries. He's not talking about a specific place, like heaven up in the sky. He's talking about God's reign on earth. He's talking about the time when the powers of evil will no longer have dominion over all of creation, but rather God will come to reign completely over all things.

When Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their gospels, they did so under the thumb of the Roman Empire, which actively persecuted Christians. Everyone living under the power of Rome would have known first-hand the might of Caesar's reign. So for these gospel writers, the Reign of God stands in direct opposition to the reign of Caesar.

When we talk about the reign of Caesar, we aren't just referring to the governance of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. The reign of Caesar stands for the authority of the world, whether it be human governments, corrupt systems, violence, pandemics, or cancer. The Reign of Caesar is all the forces of this world that seek to dominate, consume, abuse, and destroy for their own gain.

The Reign of God, however, is God's ministry of justice and mercy. It is the opposite of the Reign of Caesar. Whereas the Reign of Caesar favors the rich, the strong, the powerful, and those loyal to Caesar, the Reign of God favors the poor, the weak, the meek, and those faithful to God. Whereas the Reign of Caesar leads to oppression, sickness, and death, the Reign of God leads to freedom, restoration, and life. Whereas the Reign of Caesar offers no forgiveness or mercy, the Reign of God is full of grace.

In today's parables, Jesus talks about how mighty the Reign of God will become. I find it fascinating that he doesn't use the Roman Empire as his example. He could have said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like the Roman Empire, which has taken over the entire world." Instead, he likens the Kingdom of Heaven to more mundane, ordinary things that seem far from grand: mustard seeds and yeast.

While the Caesar's reign expands at the expense of life, God's Reign *grows* and gives life. The mustard seed grows into a great, living being, one that provides space for other creatures, like birds, to live. The bacteria in yeast grows and multiplies as it eats the flour, causing the dough to rise and expand, and producing bread that will nourish more life. In these parables of growth, the Reign of God doesn't just grow, it grows into abundance; the mustard seed becomes a tree; the leaven becomes 100 loaves of bread. The abundant life of God's Reign far outstrips the violence and death of Caesar's.

As you might expect, I've had viruses and babies on my mind lately, and so I began this sermon by offering two more parables of growth (as if we needed yet more parables today), one about a virus and one about a baby. Both of these parables, like Jesus' growth parables, show how something insignificant can grow to become something significant. The Reign of Caesar is like a global pandemic because it stretches out its long arms, seeking to infect everything it touches, seeking to do violence to people and places as it brings the whole world under its dominion.

The Reign of God is like a baby in the womb. It started out too small for the human eye but now is impossible to miss! A pregnant mother can be a sign of great hope and promise, as she bears life within her, a life that will soon enter the world and fill it with meekness, joy, beauty, and love.

When you read through Matthew's gospel, sometimes you get the idea that the Reign of God has already arrived, and sometimes you get the idea that the Reign of God is yet-to-come. So which is it? It's both. The Reign of God is both already here and yet-to-come; it is both now and not-yet.

In Matthew's gospel, we hear that Jesus has come to usher in God's Reign. He has begun a movement which has not yet been fully realized. He has begun a movement that won't be completed until he returns. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection show us that the Reign of Caesar cannot last; the Reign of Caesar is capable only of destruction and will ultimately destroy itself. Only the Reign of God, which is bent on life, will lead to abundant life.

Martin Luther King, Jr., paraphrasing an abolitionist minister, says it like this, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

What this means is that we can catch glimpses of God's Reign here and now. The powers of sin, evil, and death still maintain their hold on the earth, but the day is coming when God's Reign will be fully revealed, when the powers of sin, evil, and death will be destroyed once-and-for-all. The reign of Caesar is strong, but it is no match for the abundant Reign of God.

So, keep your eyes open for God's Reign. It's here, and it's coming. Any time you experience repentance, forgiveness, mercy, or love you catch a glimpse of the Reign of God. Anytime you see life triumph over death, you catch a glimpse of the Reign of God. Anytime you love your neighbor, or forgive your enemy, or feed the hungry you catch a glimpse of the Reign of God. In short, anytime life persists and grows, even in—especially in—the face of strife and struggle, there the Reign of God is coming.

So be on the lookout! The mustard seed is sprouting! The leaven is rising! The baby is growing!

Amen.