

The other morning, Phil and I saw a fox in our backyard, and a beautiful, healthy fox it was. Phil was so pumped, because he was able to get some rather good pictures, which he promptly posted on facebook. I found myself thinking how if we'd simply seen the fox but not gotten any pictures, he wouldn't likely have posted anything on social media; trying to describe the experience in words just wouldn't have had the appeal of a single good photo of a richly colored fox. Proving again the truth of the adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words". This truth is proven every virtual worship service in which we share, actually----in my sermon, I speak thousands of words to try to convey some Gospel truth, and then Scott Shelerud puts up one poignant, perfect picture that he's found that says it all in a few seconds. (It's all right—I'm over it!) A single, strong image is worth paragraphs of verbiage. And Jesus, that master storyteller, was well aware of this. Throughout this marvelous 13th chapter of Matthew through which we have been moving these past weeks, Jesus has been drawing short, verbal pictures for us of what the kingdom of heaven is like. We've looked at two agricultural parables: the fun parable of the exuberant sower of the seed two weeks ago, and last week, the darker-toned parable of the wheat and the weeds growing up intertwined. Both of those parables drew pictures in just a few sentences that painted for us expressive pictures of how the Kingdom of Heaven is among us now. But in today's verses, he really outdoes himself. He presents us with 6 parables describing the Kingdom of Heaven, each just *one sentence* long, that paint vivid pictures for us more than thousands of words could have done. The wonderful thing about these pictures is how diverse and yet ordinary they are---they feature people whose status varies from a peasant farmer up to a rich pearl merchant. A woman is included, as well as men. Domestic

scenes and outdoor scenes are highlighted. Most are set on the land, but one is set on sea. In fact, one can almost imagine Jesus looking at the crowd around him at the seaside and the life of the village happening about them and coming up with these pictures on the fly. Right? Look at the size of that mustard bush, it started out as a tiny seed! See that woman through her house window there, kneading the yeast into her bread? Look, over there, someone is digging in a field for buried treasure, while in this direction, we see a wealthy merchant of pearls selling his wares. Glance out to sea, there are some fisherman pulling in their nets; and over there near the temple are some scribes making copies of the Holy Scriptures. All of these scenes, these picture-perfect vignettes, would have part of the colorful daily life that made up the village and worldview of the people to whom Jesus spoke. And from each of them, He was able to skillfully create a parable, a comparison to the Kingdom of heaven, that truly demonstrates how the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, among us, in the ordinariness and dailiness of our lives. And to be absolutely honest, the situation around us in our nation and world is so distressing and disheartening right now, that we need all the encouragement to recognize the Kingdom among us that we can get! How do these single sentence parables, these pictures of the Kingdom, speak to us? Let's focus in on just the first two for our purposes this morning.

Because in the first two parables, we find *living, growing* images of what the Kingdom is like and living growing pictures of the Kingdom seem appropriate for a Garden Sunday. Specifically, Jesus draws single sentence pictures for us of a growing tree and of rising bread. The Kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is living, and it grows.

So the first parable, that of the Mustard seed, is a familiar parable that points out that big results can come out of small beginnings. That's good news. It means that planting even one small seed, taking even a first step, can jumpstart a significant process, can lead to surprisingly big results. Whether it's putting up a down payment for a house or applying for a job or deciding about a course of medical treatment, it's often hard for us to take those first steps—it feels like we're committing to something big and out of control, and we feel uncertain about even an initial step. I think that might be because we mistakenly believe we have to have everything all figured out before we even get *started*. Kind of like expecting a mustard bush to appear full grown, without first allowing for growth of the small seed. But, in reality, we just need to take a few small beginning steps, plant the small seed, and in this parable, Jesus assures us that out of such small beginnings, big results can come. The picture Jesus paints here is that of a small mustard seed growing into a great shrub that can even shelter the *songbirds* in its branches. Isn't that lovely? *That's* what the kingdom of God is like. It starts small and produces big. This can be a reminder to us that we don't have to *already* have all the answers when we *start* asking the questions. We don't have to have the whole journey mapped out before we can take *the first step*. Sometimes we just need to *ask* the first question or *take* the beginning step, plant that small seed. God can do a lot with a little. And sometimes—maybe especially times like these—we may find that all *we have is a little*: we're done to just a *little* bit of courage, we have just a *little* more strength, a *little* bit of faith. So it's good and encouraging news to us God can *do* a lot with a little--that even the big mustard bush starts as a tiny seed. We have seen this again and again in our relatively small congregation and community. Over the last decades, we have taken a number of first small steps, planted a

number of small seeds.... .the vote to expand the church, the plan to create a memorial garden, the vote to install an elevator or renovate the kitchen, the decision to put on a Julebyen, the effort of putting on our own Vacation Bible School, this year virtually...they're little steps, but they can lead to big results, as we have been blest to discover repeatedly. Little seeds can lead to big bushes.

I like the mustard seed image, but I find the next image of God's kingdom to be one of my favorite Scripture verses ever. This time Jesus describes the kingdom of God by saying: "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measure of flour until all of it was leavened." This is another living, growing image, but a more domestic and intentional image: we see the woman in her kitchen, using flour and water and salt and yeast to create bread. She does this not so much differently 2000 years ago when Jesus spoke these words than we might do today, if we bake our own bread from scratch. Yeast is alive, and as many of us discover when we accidentally forget to add it, without yeast the bread doesn't rise. With yeast, properly kneaded into the dough, the bread rises! It's practically magic! Few things are as strangely inspiring as kneading bread by hand, watching it rise, and eating fresh, warm bread. What an amazing image for the kingdom of God this is! What we can take out of this image is the resilient and hopeful message that *God is in the mix*. And, it's not always obvious that God is in the mix at first sight, just as you can't see the yeast once it's been kneaded into the dough. Looking around at our circumstances or our world, we might feel that God is absent, that we're on our own and that would be terrifying! But, that is never the case. God *is* in the mix. God's kingdom is like the yeast that makes the dough rise. Look back at so many important happenings in your life, and you will see how God brought together the right people, place, and timing to

bring about a blessing. What seems at the time to be confusion or random happenings, is actually seen in retrospect, to be the direction of God's mighty but gentle and often unseen hand. Evidence that God is in the mix, and reassuring for us in times of perplexity. Admittedly, what the future holds for any specific situation, particularly right now, is unclear. Fear and uncertainty may abound, and while we may be able to ignore them by day, in the middle of the night when we're wakeful and weary, they can threaten to overwhelm us. But, while there's a lot we don't know, what we do know is this: God is in the mix. Like yeast that makes the bread dough rise, there are signs of the kingdom in all times and places. God's presence in the mix brings hope and inspiration in all circumstances.

So here's an encouraging and faith-building exercise in which we might all participate for this week: be like Jesus and ask yourself--where can *you* see the Kingdom of Heaven right around you, in the dailiness and ordinariness of your life? What picture parables could you come up with to acknowledge the kingdom of God at hand? Couldn't I look around this lovely Memorial Garden and say: "Look! The kingdom of heaven is like a bright and colorful garden of flowers, in which every different plant contributes to the beauty of the whole?" Because the way we come together in our diversity as a faith community to create a beautiful church *is* the kingdom of heaven. Couldn't my husband have said, "Look! The kingdom of heaven is like the enthusiastic photographer who unexpectedly gets a chance to take a picture of a strong, elegant fox"? Because encountering wonder in God's creation by surprise *is* encountering the kingdom of heaven. Where will you see the Kingdom of Heaven, if you look? How would you complete the sentence that begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like...."? What parables can you

discover in the ordinary course of your life that celebrate how even little seeds grow into big trees and that God is in the mix? The kingdom of heaven is among us! Amen.