

A Kudzu-Kind of Kingdom

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

I want you to use your imagination this morning. Let me take you back in history 2000 years, to the country of Palestine, present-day Israel. You are sitting around a campfire near the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and his disciples. They have lived together, traveled together, preached and healed together for over two years. On this particular evening they have had a simple meal of fish and bread. There is a lull in the conversation and then imagine the disciple Thomas speaking:

"Master, you and the guys know that I tend to be a tad pessimistic, but I'm afraid that all of us must face some facts. Increasingly, we are being locked out of the synagogues. The most powerful religious leaders in the country are against you. Recently we heard rumors that King Herod Antipas was going to have you killed. Judas tells me that there has been a decline in contributions that may be related to all the controversy surrounding you. While it is true that lots of people still come to hear you, most of them come because they are either seeking a miraculous cure or are simply curious. They don't show any commitment. After more than two years of hard work all over this country, what do we have to show for it? I don't want to be an alarmist but we aren't exactly a booming success."

Have you ever felt discouragement in living the Christian life? I know I have. At times I have wondered

- if my prayers got above the ceiling
- if I had any Christian influence AT ALL
- if the church made any real difference in this community
- if my faith was anything more than wishful thinking?

All of us deal with discouragement from time to time. So did Jesus' disciples. When Jesus sensed that morale was down, in this instance he told these three parables that are recorded in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. These parables tell us that the Kingdom of God has something in common with

kudzu, the unofficial state flower of Mississippi. In fact, some folks credit kudzu with having prevented the whole state of Mississippi from being washed down the river. For the sake of you who may be new to the south, let me explain that kudzu is that leafy vine that you often see growing up telephone poles or covering little valleys down here. If we ever find a commercial use for the stuff, the South will surely rise again. Nothing can grow like kudzu. It is the only plant whose growth is measured in miles per hour.

You remember the story of Jack and the Beanstalk? That was no beanstalk; it was a kudzu stem. The best way to plant kudzu is to throw it over your shoulder and run. (PAUSE) It's also important to plant kudzu at the right time. Always do it at night. If you do it in broad daylight, your neighbors will take you to court.

We Christians are part of a kudzu-kind of kingdom. When Christians are faithful, God blesses his kingdom with prodigious growth and transforming influence. Let's look at these three parables.

I. The Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13: 1-9.

This is one of the few parables of Jesus that he interprets. It is a story about a farmer scattering seed. Some seed falls in a pathway and is eaten by birds; that represents the hearts which receive the gospel but the devil comes quickly and snatches it away. Some seed falls on rocky ground; therefore, its roots don't go deep enough to sustain growth. This represents the hearts which receive the gospel gladly but when persecution or trouble comes, they drop out. Other seed falls among thorns and is choked out. This represents those persons who receive the gospel gladly, but later the concentration on things of this world and the lure of wealth choke out the gospel.

Then, said Jesus, some seed falls on good soil and has spectacular growth, producing thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and even one hundred-fold. The seed represents the word of God.

This parable is both discouraging and encouraging. 1) Discouraging: 75 percent of the people who hear the gospel will NOT become long-term Christians. 2) Encouraging: the 25 percent who DO

become committed believers are so amazingly productive that the entire world can be changed through them.

II. The Parable of the Mustard Seed Matthew 13: 31 -32.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed sown by a farmer. Though it is one of the smallest of seeds, it produces the largest of shrubs. I didn't know just how small the Palestinian mustard seed was until my recent trip to the Holy Land. We came upon a field near Tiberius that was covered with mustard plants. As I broke open the pod that contained the single seed, I discovered that it was as small as the end of a sharpened pencil. You almost have to have a magnifying glass just to see it. But the plant that it produces does, in fact, grows to such size that birds come from all over to make their nests in its branches and to feast on its tiny black seeds. The kingdom of God when first planted here or there looks tiny and vulnerable; but it grows like kudzu.

Some years ago in Charlotte, North Carolina, the ministerial association decided not to support a city-wide revival because the invited evangelist, in the opinion of some of the pastors, was lacking in sophistication. But a Presbyterian Sunday School teacher ignored the ministerial association and encouraged his students to attend. In response, the lanky son of a dairy farmer attended the revival. There he surrendered his heart to Christ. The whole world has heard the name of that farmer's son-- Billy Graham. No one recalls the name of the Sunday school teacher who invited him, no one except God. That's the way it is in the kingdom of God. Tiny, inauspicious beginnings are blessed with glorious results.

III. The Parable of Yeast or Leaven, Matthew 13: 33. .

Leaven was a little piece of dough kept over from a previous baking of bread. Of course, since it was not refrigerated, it gradually fermented. Thus, yeast or leaven was produced for the next baking of bread. Only a tiny amount of fermented dough was necessary for baking forty or fifty pounds of bread. Perhaps you have been introduced to unleavened bread. It is utterly tasteless and the more

you chew it, the bigger it gets. But you can take the very same ingredients and add a tiny bit of yeast or leaven and out comes a Burger-King biscuit. What a huge difference is made by a tiny bit of yeast.

Jesus used this example to make a powerful point. Just as that tiny amount of leaven can transform fifty pounds of bread, a few committed Christians can revolutionize society. Back in the 1960s Martin Luther King, Jr. led a momentous march between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. On a bridge the marchers were confronted Sheriff Clark and hundreds of hostile police. Clark shouted, "Turn back". And King responded, "We've come too far to turn back now."

Clark warned, "If you don't turn back, we're going to bash in your heads".

An undaunted King responded, "If you hit me, I will love you. If you kick me, I will love you. If you kill me, the last words from my mouth will be 'I love you.'"

Clark's forces charged with their clubs and police dogs. It appeared that the marchers were beaten and routed. But television cameras carried those images across the world. Soon the verdict was clear: through those marchers, the civil rights movement had won the hearts of America. When a Christian stands firm for faith and principle, God delivers results.

Isn't it strange how the kingdom works? The message from the Lord through all three of these parables is this: Christians, NEVER give up. NEVER despair. NEVER think small. The Kingdom of God is like kudzu. It often has humble beginnings, but then it can have prodigious growth, and a transforming influence. St. Paul knew all this and declared, **"So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up"**. (Galatians 6:9)

Let me close with a story from the life of Dr. Bill Hinson, a former pastor of the largest united Methodist church in the world -- First United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas. When Bill was a college student, he was invited to preach one Sunday at a rural church in South Georgia. It was a hot September Sunday. Throughout his sermon, he was distracted by a barefoot boy on the front row who kept swinging his feet. Even before the sermon was over, Bill thought to himself, "This sermon is a loser." After the benediction that same 10-year-old boy named Donnie came up and introduced

himself and invited Bill to come have lunch with his family. Bill thought to himself, "He owes me at least that after messing up my sermon."

They had a delightful lunch. Then Bill drove back to school. A few weeks later he went to his mailbox and found a fat envelope which jingled when he extracted it. It was from Donnie, and contained 57 cents in change. The note said this: "Dear Brother Bill, I'm sending you my egg money to help you go to school to learn to be a better preacher". Bill remembered where Donnie's father worked. He called him and expressed thanks but said, "I can't take Donnie's money. I'll send it right back to him."

"Oh no," said his father. "Don't do that. Donnie is taking better care of his chickens than he ever has before, and he is sending you every penny of his profit and he is going to continue doing it until you get out of school." The weeks turned into months and the months into years. Donnie did not stop until Bill graduated. Donnie is a grown and a very successful businessman. Occasionally he would come to see Bill Hinson, in his private plane, to check on his investment. Bill Hinson wrote this: "There were times back in school when I took that letter full of change and went back to my room and fell on my knees and prayed, 'Dear God, There's a little kid out there giving his all for me. Help me, Lord, to be worthy of that gift.'"

Isn't that how the Kingdom of God works? The pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the world got his early boost from something as small 57 cents - a 10-year-old's egg money.

Never give up. Never despair. Never think small.

The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Christ,
and He shall reign forever and ever.

HALLELUJAH!