



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Like a Mustard Seed

Luke 13:10-21

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What does the kingdom of God look like? And how has it or how will it come? Brothers and sisters, what we think of the kingdom, what we think of how it comes and how it is made manifests shapes how we live as the people of God. I think back to my study of European history when I was an undergrad. In 800 Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor. That empire dominated Europe in one form or another for the next thousand years, until it was defeated by Napoleon in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. That empire was characterised by war and power-mongering, by corruption and decadence. The Holy Roman Empire wasn't Roman, it wasn't an empire, and—most important—it wasn't holy. And yet that empire, along with the rest of Europe, which wasn't usually any better—was synonymous with “Christendom” for a thousand years. For better or for worse, that connection shaped the way both Christians on the inside and non-Christians on the outside thought of God's kingdom and God's people.

I think, too, of growing up in Evangelical circles the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. It was in the late 1970s that Republican strategists realised they could leverage issues like abortion to galvanise evangelical Christian voters and build their support base. They got churches and pastors on board and pretty soon we were doing their work for them, creating political groups like the Moral Majority and campaigning for their candidates so much that within a few years, for all practical purposes, a Republican dominated America became virtually synonymous with the kingdom of God. Christians elected

politicians to end abortion and to legislate good morality at home, but we turned a blind eye to their brutal and barbaric covert actions in the Third World, to their creation of totalitarian regimes and dictators, and to their funding much of it through the covert production and sale of heroin and cocaine. And to add apocalyptic fuel to the fire, preachers were telling us that the Last Days were upon us and it would come down to us versus the Communists—not unlike the Jews of Jesus' day when everyone expected the imminent coming of the Messiah and a great showdown between Israel and the Romans. And through all of that we shaped what people around the world think of Christians. Today in the Middle East our brothers and sisters are facing the repercussions of guilt by association and being martyred for it.

But these are just two examples. This is the sort of thing that happens whenever God's people forget the true nature of the kingdom. The Jews of Jesus' day were doing the same thing. God had given them the law as a means of being a light to the nations, but instead they used it as a means of condemning the nations. In their zeal to keep the finer points, they forgot the real purpose behind it. As we saw Jesus saying to the Pharisees in Chapter 11, “Woe to you! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God.” Keeping the law became a means of escaping God's judgement, when God had meant it to be a means for Israel to bless the nations. And this is still a problem for the modern-day descendants of the Pharisees. I don't know why it's suddenly become a problem in the last year or two, but lately there have been a number of stories about flights to Israel being held up because of ultra-orthodox Jewish men refusing to sit next to women. An image that started circulating a few weeks ago shows one man's extreme solution to the problem: he had someone seal him inside a giant plastic bag. There he sits in his seat on the plane, wrapped

in plastic. I don't know how he breathed or ate or used the washroom for the long flight to Tel Aviv, but it certainly made sure that he wasn't defiled by anything unclean. And yet this is just the sort of misapplication of the law that we've seen Jesus condemning in Luke's Gospel. And it's just the sort of wrong-headed thinking about the nature of the kingdom that Jesus has been dealing with. If Jesus were telling parables today he might very well have talked about Pharisees sealing themselves in plastic bags instead of hiding candles under baskets.

This morning we'll be looking at Luke 13:10-21. For the last several chapters we've been with Jesus as he addressed a crowd somewhere along his route to Jerusalem. He's been preaching about what it means to be a disciple and about the urgency of repentance and of following him in light of the judgement that was just around the corner. In verse 10 Luke changes the scene. Jesus has stopped on the Sabbath to rest in some town or village along his route and he's been invited to teach on the Scriptures. Luke writes:

**Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. (Luke 13:10-13)**

Luke doesn't say what passage of Scripture Jesus was teaching on, but we already know his message. He came to preach good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and release to the captives. We can be sure that Jesus was somehow preaching on these themes. But Jesus is more than *talk*. He wants people to *see* the evidence that he is inaugurating the kingdom.

He not only wants them to know what the kingdom is like, but he wants them to see it in action. He wants to dispel all their confused and mixed up ideas and he calls them then to join this kingdom. And so he calls this woman out of the congregation. The ESV says that she had a “disabling spirit”. The Greek word literally means “weakness”, and it had her so crippled that she was doubled over. In verse 16 Jesus describes her as having been bound by the Satan, the Accuser.

For eighteen years this woman was incapacitated. Luke doesn’t say whether it was a medical or a psychosomatic problem or an issue of demon-possession, but Jesus does describe her as being “bound” by the one who goes by the title of “Accuser”. I’m speculating here, but maybe this woman was guilty of some sin that came with a crushing weight of guilt. Or maybe she had been verbally or mentally abused and the weight of the abuse left her literally doubled over. I think of some of the conversations I’ve had with David Bowler. Many of you know him and that his medical specialty is pain management. He’s told me that pain is often rooted in emotional and spiritual problems. Sometimes pain just won’t go away. And that’s when he told me it’s often helpful to counsel and pray with a patient to deal with some emotional or spiritual issue that underlies the pain. That may well have been this woman’s problem. Whether she’d done something wrong or not, the Satan—the Accuser—had weighed her down with something impossible to bear and had left her crippled by it. And now Jesus comes, preaching about release to the captives. He calls her forward. Imagine her hobbling, hunched over, from her seat in the congregation. The Greek word Luke uses to describe her is used in the Old Testament to describe someone humble—someone of no account.<sup>1</sup> Remember that these were people who drew a direct

connection between physical disability and sin. Everyone in that small town knew who she was, but because of her problems she was an “outsider”. And yet the woman goes to Jesus as the people watch—and he sets her free. He removes the weight or releases her muscles or straightens her bones—whatever the cause was, Jesus releases her from it. And she naturally glorified God right then and there.

Brothers and sisters, this was Jesus manifesting and making present the kingdom of God. This was Jesus pushing back the darkness. The woman glorified God, but the man in charge of the synagogue has the opposite reaction. He couldn’t accept that *this* is what God’s kingdom is like. The job of the synagogue ruler, amongst other things, was to make sure that worship was conducted in accordance with the law. He exemplifies Israel in the story. He’s got the same problem that the scribes and the Pharisees have. He’s so focused on the minutia of the law that he’s forgotten the big picture and the real purpose of the law. This is the man with his light under the basket. This is the man in the plastic bag on the airplane. Look at verse 14:

**But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”**

Talk about a wet blanket! A woman has just been healed, God’s kingdom and his glory have just been manifested, and this man steps forward and condemns it all because it’s being done on the wrong day of the week. And notice that the ruler doesn’t get into a debate with Jesus. His attitude and his position was a given. He addresses the congregation directly and he doesn’t condemn Jesus’ actions with an appeal to Scripture. What he says was a

given—accepted by everyone. They *knew* that you don’t heal on the Sabbath because healing is work. And yet it begs the question: This woman has been crippled for eighteen years and no one ever bothered to heal her on *any* day of the week, let alone the Sabbath. For eighteen years she was living with this disability or weakness or oppression. For eighteen years she was in the dark, weighed down by sin, real or imagined. And all it took was for Jesus to manifest the kingdom and to shine the light into her dark little corner and she was set free. Over the course of those eighteen years there were 5,631 days that weren’t Sabbaths, but had ever bothered to do what Jesus did for her. Again, this is the light under the basket where it benefits no one. This is the man in the plastic bag so afraid of becoming unclean that he misses his chance to be a blessing to others. And this is what Jesus gets at in his rebuke.

**Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (Luke 13:16-17)**

Notice first that Luke reminds us that Jesus is the Lord. The man confronting him was ruler of the synagogue, but Jesus is the Lord—he’s the ruler of Creation and Lord of the Sabbath. And with that authority he rebukes this man and with him his congregation: “You hypocrites!” And then he illustrates why. Most of them owned farm animals of some kind and they all knew that it was perfectly acceptable to water animals on the Sabbath so that they wouldn’t die of thirst. Many of the people there had probably untied an ox or a donkey that

<sup>1</sup> σνγγύπτω (cf. Sirach 12:11)

very morning to take it for a drink. And yet here was a woman—a daughter of Abraham, one of God’s people—who was bound by the devil, and they balk at Jesus setting her free. How could anyone do that? And on the Sabbath no less! What better day could there be than that to manifest God’s power over sin and death? The Sabbath was the very day that pointed the people toward their hope of rest and restoration in the kingdom of God.

But the people don’t really understand. They’re just too mired in their wrong expectations about the kingdom and about the Messiah. Jesus wins the debate with the synagogue ruler and the people rejoice and glorify God, but they don’t really understand what Jesus is up to. It’s not just about healing a woman bound by the Satan. Jesus came preaching good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and release to the captives, but there’s a bigger scope to that message than ministry to specific individuals. Each time Jesus sets someone free, each time he heals, and each time he forgives, he’s giving a small-scale illustration of what he’s come to do for Israel and for all of humanity. The woman in the synagogue—a daughter of Abraham—represents all of Israel. Through Abraham Israel was given a promise and a mission to be light to the gentiles, but instead they had been bound by the devil. Israel put her light under a basket. She forgot the true purpose of the law, using it to condemn those in darkness rather than a light to be taken to them. But just like this woman, Jesus can free Israel from her bondage. All she has to do is hear him and repent.

But Israel refused. Here’s Jesus the Messiah on his way to Jerusalem. The people got the Son of David part. They expected the Messiah to storm Jerusalem, to destroy the Romans, and to establish his eternal kingdom there. The problem is that they had forgotten that the Messiah was also Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, who was to suffer

and die for his people in order to establish that eternal kingdom. And because the Suffering Servant wasn’t part of their vision, they were happy to glorify God in the healing of this woman and so many other individuals, but they just couldn’t see how these things manifested the great coming kingdom. And this is what Jesus gets at in the two illustrations that follow. Look at verses 18-19:

**He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”**

They thought the kingdom was like King David coming in his chariot and striking down the Romans with his sword. That’s why they just couldn’t get on board with him and his vision of the kingdom. What he describes is something completely off their radar: the kingdom is like a mustard seed.

This is where Jesus challenges us, too, and our ideas of “Christendom” as something like the Holy Roman Empire or any other empire or country or government in which we Christians somehow capture the power of Caesar to usher in the kingdom.

Maybe it wasn’t so weird for Jesus to describe the kingdom using a tree as a metaphor. But in those terms they would have thought of the kingdom as one of the famed cedar trees of Lebanon—the ones used to make the beams of the temple and of David’s palace. We might be tempted to think of it as being like one of the great oaks outside the windows here. Or maybe as a mighty redwood tree, with a trunk so big a car can be driven through and top so high you’ve got to lie on your back on the ground to see it. But that’s not how Jesus describes the kingdom. No. Instead it’s like a tiny mustard seed, he says. Mustard trees—really mustard *bushes*—aren’t

small by any means, but they aren’t particularly large either—certainly nothing like an oak or a cedar or a redwood—but that’s not Jesus’ point. His point is that kingdom of God comes not by the sword, not by earthly power, not by intrigue and it doesn’t represent the powerful and the privileged. No, the kingdom of God comes in these small acts that nevertheless manifest the mighty saving power of God. The kingdom of God comes in the preaching of Good news to the poor, in the giving of sight to the blind, and in the release of captives. The kingdom of God comes as God humbles himself, takes up our human flesh himself, and dies on a cross for the sins of his people. The kingdom of God comes as his own people repent in humility, receive his grace, and become, not overlords, but servants—as they seek to serve those still lost in darkness—reaching out even to our enemies with the love of the Saviour.

It goes against all human reasoning. Caesar was emperor because he had power and privilege. But that’s not how the kingdom of God manifests itself. And if we’re tempted to be discouraged by the smallness of a mustard seed or if we’re tempted ignore the mustard seed to go ahead anyway to use worldly means to build the kingdom of God, Jesus warns us again with a second illustration in verses 20-21:

**And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”**

Making bread is an odd analogy. People don’t normally compare a kingdom to bread. But God’s kingdom isn’t an ordinary kingdom. Three measures is a *lot* of flour—enough enough to make bread for about 150 people. And yet any baker knows that it only takes a little bit of yeast to leaven even the biggest lump

of dough. It takes time and it takes the right conditions, but the leaven will eventually do its work. And just so with God's kingdom.

For the people in the synagogue that day the woman's healing was a wonderful miracle, but they couldn't grasp the idea that it was manifesting the kingdom. They expected the king to break into the world in some huge and breath-taking event that would change their world. A bent-over woman here, a leper there, even a dead man or two—those were nothing more than mustard seeds; those were little pinches of leaven. And yet Jesus reminds us that the kingdom is built on mustard seeds and pinches of leaven. In his Father's time and cultivated by the Holy Spirit the seed will grow, the leaven will do its work—pushing back the darkness until the day when there's no darkness left and the kingdom has been fully inaugurated.

Brothers and sisters, is that the kind of kingdom we envision? It should be. But, I think, a lot of the time our vision of God's kingdom looks an awful lot like Caesar's kingdom or maybe like the corporate kingdoms whose workings and philosophies so dominate our culture's thinking. This is why we think we can bring God's kingdom by electing the right men and women or by passing the right legislation. It's why we so often run our churches like businesses instead of churches. This is why we're often so tempted to water down the Gospel or to preach self-help and pop-psychology instead of Scripture. We forget the purpose of the light Jesus has given us and we use it to condemn rather than to redeem. We do these things because we've forgotten the true nature of God's kingdom. We do these things because we've lost sight of the mustard seed and the pinch of leaven. Let us remember that the kingdom comes one person at a time as we preach good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and release to the

captives and as, little by little we push back the darkness.

And let us not become discouraged. It's easy to get excited about big programmes and big events. And it's easy to think that we have little or nothing to contribute to the kingdom because we don't have a hundred loaves of bread to offer or a cedar or a redwood tree. We forget that our daily acts of faithfulness and our daily witness that Jesus is Lord are the tiny seeds and pinches of leaven that bring the kingdom. Parents, consciously raising covenant children builds the kingdom. Cultivating lives that brightly shine the light of Christ and that make those in the dark constructively curious builds the kingdom. And never be afraid of becoming unclean. There's no reason for a Christian not to embrace the leper or to heal on the Sabbath. No Christian should ever wrap himself in a plastic bag on an airplane for fear of becoming unclean. Jesus has washed us clean from the defilement of sin and he's poured his own Spirit into us. His life, his forgiveness, his peace should flow freely from us to the dead, the sick, the sinful, and the unclean of the world. Brothers and sisters, each small act of faithfulness pushes back the darkness and every act of love overcomes sin and death with the life of Jesus. This is what the kingdom is like.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we asked in the collect for the wisdom to know the things we ought to do and for the grace and power faithfully to fulfil them. Father, teach us the nature of your kingdom. Remind us to be faithful in planting mustard seeds and pinches of leaven. Let us be faithful with the gifts and the blessings that you have given that we might bless others, sharing with them the forgiving grace of Jesus, bringing life and release to those captive to sin and death, and as we do so manifesting your kingdom and pushing back the

darkness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.