**The Invisible Kingdom**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**July 26, 2020**

**Matthew 13:24-30,36-43**

One of the first persons that I met after arriving as the Supply minister at St Margaret’s Church in Kingston was a woman who lived with a mental illness. She was harmless and found sanctuary in the church during the week doing odd jobs. It was a way for the staff associate to keep an eye on her and make sure that she ate and felt valued. I did not expect her to attend the service on the first Sunday that I preached; however, there she was at the back on the right side of the sanctuary. After the service she came up to me and I will never forget what she said. She said, “You have a great voice. I loved listening to you. I didn’t understand a word you said, but I love how you said it.” It made me chuckle then and still makes me smile years after the fact. I think of her and that conversation most weeks when I sit down to ponder the lectionary readings.

What is the point of crafting a sermon that will fall on deaf ears because the illustrations, words and content are beyond one’s understanding? Jesus understood this as well as any teacher and motivational speaker that has lived. He looked out over a sea of faces that included disciples, Pharisees, widow, labourer and child and drew images that were familiar to make his point. As he looked out over the faces of those who gathered to hear him he was cognizant of their reality.

They lived under Roman occupation and needed to give Roman authority its due. They paid taxes to Rome and its vassals and were required to pay into the temple treasury as well. They needed to observe Jewish laws surrounding day to day living, diet and worship while at the same time being mindful of homage to Roman official and edict. They were poor and oppressed and in need of hope and encouragement and so he looked out over the crowd and wanted to give them something to believe in that would resonate louder than the growl in their empty belly; something that would sustain them in the day to day drudgery of life and living; empowerment that would cause them neither to lose heart or faith while living with unfulfilled prophecy. They needed a word of hope that would lift them up above the drudgery and oppression with which they lived. And so he looked out over the crowd and said, God’s empire is like a tiny mustard seed that becomes a tree.

In the present God’s kingdom seems small, invisible and with little impact, but it will become larger as God’s reign is established over all. Similarly, he said that God’s realm is like a small amount of yeast that leavens a much larger bowl of dough. Just as yeast is small, secretive and invisible it will have a huge impact on everything with which it comes in contact. God’s kingdom is like a hidden treasure that so impacts a person’s life that seeking for it and the willingness to sacrifice and set aside all else becomes paramount. His words may not have contained all of the answers for which they were seeking but they offered a grain of hope to encourage them to draw in breath and stay the course. Even when you can’t see it and do not have obvious proof, the kingdom is not far away.

He did not say explicitly that oppression, hardship and injustice would come to an end. But he did encourage them to have hope; to look beyond the obvious and to dare to believe in the power of the small beginnings to morph into greater and more obvious proof of God’s power, presence and infinite love. There is something very powerful and at work in the seeming invisible mystery.

Mustard seeds were invasive. The farmer would not have planted this weed into the crop despite its ability to sprout into something large and very present. So one may ask if the parable about the mustard seed is not just about humble beginnings and how acorns become mighty oaks, but may be about how there may be an invasive and unpredictable quality to the kingdom of God.

I had a conversation with two of my daughters who are more agnostic than theistic. Part of their journey to skepticism and unbelief is rooted in unanswered prayer. They have been disappointed when God did not seem to give them what they asked for-specifically to save the life of their older sister all those years ago- and have come to the conclusion that God cannot exist. Or does not care about them and their wants.

Many others draw the same conclusion and often for the same reason-when God disappoints it seems fruitless to believe. And while there are those who have had different experiences and miraculous intervention and magnanimous answered prayer, I have come to believe in the more invisible but equally as grounding power of the kingdom.

The text includes a string of parables referring to things that are hidden: the treasure hidden in a field; the one fine pearl hidden amid myriad others that were not as magnificent; a net full of fish that contained both good and bad that could be easily separated. The mustard seed is small and hidden in among the sown seed so perhaps the point is not just about small beginnings producing grand results and how a little leaven affects the whole, but the power of the hidden to become the powerful presence of the kingdom in invasive and unpredictable ways.

I could say to my daughters yes your sister died, but our family has remained intact. Yes she got sick but it was not something genetic that was the cause that could also affect them and their children. Indeed, there is an empty chair but people have come and gone from our lives and kept us grounded. And we have discovered that there is a fragility to human life that has not made us cynical or paranoid but has taught us how precious a gift life is. More importantly we have also learned that there is a quality of eternal life in the here and now as we keep a memory alive and believe that there will come a time when we will be reunited again. This may be the pearl of great value; the yeast that leavens the whole; the discernment between knowing the difference between the good and the bad; retaining the good but ridding ourselves of the bad. This is the invasive, invisible power of God at work in subtle ways.

There is hidden value in the kingdom parables that goes beyond small beginnings and reminds that the powerful kingdom is ever near, encroaching closer and opening our eyes to new truths and our souls to deeper awareness that is hidden but transformative. If there were texts that we need to ponder and find hope and encouragement in during these challenging times it is the message of transforming power and hope that is hidden but actively engaged in due diligence. There is increasing unrest in much of the world because of violence and inequality.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has become a force to be reckoned with and there have been demands in several Canadian Municipalities to have Police Forces defunded and perhaps dismantled and to invest more tax dollars into social service agencies. And while the motions have been defeated in the various councils where there have been motions made, this is a symptom of the barometer rising in Canada and the demands for equality, justice and tolerance needing to be acknowledged.

There is an election on the horizon in the United States and many fear a second term for the incumbent who has been far from diplomatic in the wake of pandemic, race relations and demands to rename cities and institutions that honour racists and bigots. The death toll rises from Covid19 and no amount of denial and distancing from this truth by the president can change this. Denying the magnitude and patting oneself on the back for lack of leadership cheapens the office and is a public disgrace.

It is easy for anyone to elaborate on all that is imperfect in the world and much more of a challenge to offer up solutions. I can’t predict if the black lives matter movement will culminate in justice and respect for all. Nor can I speculate on whether the incumbent will win a second term in the upcoming American election. We can’t say for sure just how long we will be living under the influence of Covid19. It is uncertain about when our children will be able to attend classes and if they will go to school at all, or for some of the week and have a combination of in class and at home on line learning. Young people who did not have the graduation from high school that they envisioned may be denied the orientation to college and university that launches most post-secondary careers. People will have crises’ of faith because of unanswered prayer and will be disappointed in God when things do not pan out the way they had hoped. The problems and challenges that we face as Christians and as citizens of the world are large and concerning. But in among the threats and challenges there is the hidden pearl, and the mustard seed.

The mustard seed is hidden, weightless and lying undetected; mixing in with what is more noticeable. A mustard tree is not what is expected but no one notices the seed and as way leads on to way the seed germinates, sprouts and grows and radically reorients what is expected. So we can hope that figurative mustard seeds are taking root in many of the challenging situations with which we are currently living. I am not saying that everything happens for a reason. I still struggle to embrace this broad and sweeping assertion as fact. However, I have to believe that even in the very challenging times of uncertainty, loss and threat there is still the odd pinprick of light. The invasive and invisible kingdom is present and at work taking firm hold and transforming.

On the first Sunday that I preached in a new congregation a woman living with mental illness affirmed my gifts and challenged me to be even more thoughtful in the exercise of my ministry. It is nice to know that my voice is calming but if people do not understand the point I am trying to make, then perhaps my sermons can be relegated to that of a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. Jesus said, God’s realm is like a mustard seed- full of potential. God’s realm is like yeast, secretive and invisible but full of impact. This is still our faith and hope. To God be the glory now and ever. Amen.