

POSSIBILITY

Series: Last, Lasting, Everlasting: Stories of Jesus on the Way to Jerusalem

Luke 13:18-21

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What you see is what you get. This is a proverb-type statement we often share with those who are basing a decision on what they think something will be, not what something is. It is a word of caution about expecting something that is not there. When my girls began dating, they would get interested in boys they were sure, with a little molding, would be fine boyfriends. They would talk with me dreamily about what these boys would be like. My response was always that you need to like the boy for what he is, not for what you think you will make him. What you see is what you get. Don't sign a contract with bad terms because you are sure you can improve them. Don't buy a car ignoring the bent frame because you like the color and think a car that good looking will surely drive well. In all things, look carefully, because what you see is what you get.

Normally, this is sound advice. It is advice, though, that worked against what Jesus was trying to do. He was trying to get people to see and believe in something that was not yet there: the kingdom of God. Remember Jesus' first, and in some ways his only, sermon: "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This was at the heart of Christ's mission: proclaiming the coming kingdom of God. He was inviting people into this kingdom. He was calling upon them to change their ways of thinking and their ways of living so that they could be part of the coming kingdom. You are going to want to be part of it, he said. It is wonderful, he said. In the kingdom there is no sickness, and to demonstrate that he healed everyone he touched. In the kingdom there is enough for all, and to demonstrate this he fed thousands with just a few loaves. In the kingdom there is no death, and to demonstrate that he raised Jairus' daughter, and the son of the widow at Nain and Lazarus. In the kingdom there is a place for everyone, and to demonstrate that he ate with sinners, spent time with the outcasts, and blessed the children. It is so wonderful, he said, that it is like finding a treasure in the field that is worth selling everything in order to buy it, and like the perfect pearl, worth selling all other pearls to buy.

Sounds fantastic, doesn't it? Obviously, everyone would want to be part of that. Except for the fact that it did not seem real. Oh, Jesus healed many, but far more died from sickness than he could ever touch. Jesus fed many, but far more were hungry than he could ever feed. Jesus raised the dead to life, but far more died every day than he could ever raise. And it was nice that he embraced the ones ignored by society, but that did not get them jobs, or make them welcome in the synagogues, or raise their esteem in

the eyes of the religious leaders, or keep them from being abused by the Romans. Yes, Jesus was inspiring, even amazing; he helped them and raised their spirits, but what you see is what you get, and what they saw was the world going on pretty much the same as it always went. So excuse them if they came to be healed or came to be fed but then went home. Oh, Jesus had a hard time getting people to see what could not yet be seen.

One day Jesus healed a woman who for eighteen years had been bent over, unable to straighten up. Her healing was cause for celebration. But he healed her on the Sabbath and the leader of the synagogue took offense. He scolded the woman and Jesus saying that there were six days to be healed and the Sabbath was not one of them. It was the same old hard-headed, this is how it is and it will never change, thinking that he encountered day in and day out. The leader did not see the healing as an act of mercy or as a sign that a new day was coming in which mercy would trump law. It was yet another sign to Jesus that people were not seeing what he was trying to describe.

So he asked, rhetorically, to what can I compare the kingdom of God? He answered his own question by comparing it to a mustard seed and to some yeast. What was his point? I'm thinking that he was making the point that what you see is not necessarily what you get.

A mustard seed is a tiny seed. The mustard plant is a substantial plant. No one looking at the seed would expect a large plant to come from it. It is too inconsequential, too little. But what you see is not what you get. A very large plant actually does come from it. You use a very, very small amount of yeast to get dough to rise. If you had no experience with it, you would think it would make no difference. But if you add more, thinking it needs more, your kitchen may look like the zombie apocalypse as the dough keeps rising and rising. Once again, what you see is not what you get.

Surely Jesus was trying to help the people to understand that, while the signs of the kingdom seemed small when up against the large reality of daily life, the fact was something big was coming. It may not look like much to them now, but the kingdom was surely coming.

This message was especially urgent because he was on his way to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and abused and executed. Who would believe then? When he was hanging on the cross, who would believe that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was near? It would appear all the more obvious that it was business as usual, and any hope they had that maybe what Jesus said was true would be dashed. At the ascension, eleven disciples were commissioned to spread the gospel through the whole world. Eleven through the whole world? Surely they would think this was impossible, such a small, insignificant group accomplishing such a task. Don't be fooled, he was saying. The seed has been planted. Yes, it is tiny, but what comes from it will be great. The yeast has been added. Yes, it is just a pinch, but the dough will rise.

It is helpful to remind ourselves of this lesson on a regular basis. Is there anyone who does not, at least sometimes, feel overwhelmed, discouraged, thinking that what we want to accomplish as Christian people cannot be done? As you know, after forty-one years, I am preparing to trade in the clerical collar for a Hawaiian shirt and carryon bag. As I reflect about these past decades, I know that I have been able to touch the lives of some people in meaningful ways, and that I have done good work in several communities, and, as faithfully as possible, have proclaimed the good news of Jesus. I have a great sense of fulfillment from that. But I also know that I pick up the paper each morning and it doesn't read any better than forty years ago. I'm tempted to say it reads worse, my Lord, we just had another school shooting. But then I remember every so often in school, practicing getting under our desk in case of nuclear attack, as if our desks would somehow protect us, and rampant segregation and a host of other issues. Every age has its issues. I don't know that things are worse, but they sure don't seem better, and it is tempting to think things will never be better because, let's face it, what you see is what you get.

Sometimes I think everything that I have done over forty years is nothing but planting a tiny mustard seed in a massive, weed-filled field. Then I remember some of what has grown from that seed and some that might yet grow. More importantly, I remember that I am not the only one planting mustard seeds. Each of you, in your own way, is also planting, as are faithful people in other churches all around the world. To change the metaphor, disciples of Christ are serving as yeast in the dough of their lives.

Great, but does it really make any difference? Well, literally around the world, there are hospitals, hospices, assisted living centers, community centers, colleges and universities, soup kitchens, women's shelters, and orphanages founded and operated by believers. In many third-world villages, there is clean water and a passable road because of the church, not the government. Last month we celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a Baptist preacher motivated to give his very life to make a difference, motivated by faith and, while we have a long way to go in relation to race matters, we have come a long way because of his efforts and the efforts of other Christian people. Each year we send a team to help with a Habitat project, an idea from a few Christian farmers. We send a team regularly to Nicaragua, inspired by our own Amanda Jones. If you are able to get needed blood in the hospital, it may have come from one of our blood drives.

Everything I have just mentioned began with an idea the size of a mustard seed. You can bet the ideas were pooh-poohed by the realists who said they could never happen. But disciples who believed Jesus when he said that the kingdom is at hand, saw the possibilities and planted those mustard seeds anyway and, oh my, what plants they have produced.

Jesus had to have felt a little discouraged when the response to an amazing and merciful healing was not joy, but indignation. It was a neon sign about how much he

would have to overcome for people to grasp what he was offering. I don't know, maybe he was speaking these parables to himself as much as to the crowd, reminding himself that great things can come from tiny beginnings. At the very least, he was teaching us. Don't be fooled by what you see. Look instead for what you cannot yet see. Look for what is possible. It may not yet be obvious, but the kingdom of God is near. The signs are present and, for those looking, unmistakable.

Don't underestimate or discount the mustard seed or a pinch of yeast. Be a believer of possibility. The parables of the mustard seed and yeast were some of Christ's last words. They are lasting words that lead to everlasting life.

Amen.