

The Hidden Kingdom
Matthew 13:31-35, 44-46, 51-52

Murder rates rising. Cancel culture dominating our universities and Marxist racial theories spreading in our elementary schools. Biblical teachings on abortion, marriage, and even what it means to be male or female not only just ignored and belittled, but shouted down and vilified as intolerant, hateful, and even bigoted. To say that America is careening away from the Christian faith is a bit of an understatement.

So we shouldn't be surprised to hear that church membership in America is declining, and rather rapidly. When the Gallup organization began asking the question in 1937, 73% of Americans reported being a member of some sort of house of worship: a church or synagogue of some kind. Now only 47% say they do. Moreover, Americans who express no religious preference has grown from 8% around the turn of the 21st century to 21% today. Perhaps most troubling of all is the fact that, of people who have been born after 1981, only 36% claim to be members of any sort of house of worship.

And as we learn from the previous passage, the parable of the wheat and the tares, everyone who attends a church and calls himself a Christian can't really be classified as a follower of Jesus, at least in any historically orthodox sense of the word. So, in order to get a grip on just how many Americans embrace what we would probably label as true Biblical Christianity, Barna research asks the following clarifying questions, based on the beliefs articulated by the National Association of Evangelicals:

Do you believe Satan is real? Do you believe salvation is based on grace and not works? Do you have a personal responsibility to share your faith with others? Is faith in God the top priority in your life? Do you believe that Jesus lived a sinless life on earth? Is the Bible accurate in all its teachings? Has your life been greatly transformed by your faith?

That's all pretty standard, and we might even say Sunday-school level Christianity. But Barna estimated back in 2006 that there were only 18 million Americans who could answer "yes" to all nine questions, only around 8% of the total population.

So, given the fact that our culture is in freefall, what hope do 8% of us possibly have to stem the growing tide of wickedness? Well, think back to when Jesus taught the parable of the mustard seed. Sure, He had crowds of people hanging on His every word, but because He taught them in parables, a lot of them didn't understand what He was saying. No, at the time Jesus first spoke the words of this passage, He only had 12 men – His disciples – who really had much of a clue about His life and ministry.

But let's face it: those twelve weren't really that far ahead of the rest of the crowd. For even though Jesus took care to explain what His parables meant to the disciples, and even though they saw Him do all sorts of amazing miracles, it wasn't until chapter 16 that Peter finally confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. And as soon as Jesus made it plain to the disciples that He was not heading to Jerusalem to sit on a throne but to die on a cross, Peter rebuked Him. In a similar way, Judas would end up betraying Jesus, Peter would end up denying Him, and all the disciples would run off and abandon Him at the time He was arrested. Yes, at the time Jesus died, there was really only one person we can be sure was truly following Him: one of the two thieves who was dying on another cross next to Him.

So, Jesus wasn't engaging in a preacher's exaggeration when he said that the Kingdom of Heaven starts out like a mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds gardeners planted in those days and in that region. But packed inside that tiny package is tremendous power: for when the mustard plant is fully grown, it dwarfs all the rest of the produce of the garden. Sure, Oklahoma corn may grow as high as an elephant's eye – about 10 feet – but mustard plants get much bigger. Even in the semi-arid climate of Israel, they can grow to be 15 feet tall. And just as Jesus describes in verse 32, in the Fall the branches of the mustard plant become sturdy enough for birds to build nests in them, doubtless seeking shade from the sun which rises just about as high in Jerusalem as it does in Jackson, Mississippi.

So, what does the mustard seed tell us? In short, that big things can emerge from the smallest of beginnings. That has certainly been true in the case of the Church, which started, as we have seen, with just 12 fearful, thick-headed disciples. But on the day of Pentecost, a little over a month after Jesus' resurrection, their number suddenly grew to more than 3000. And in the months that followed, great multitudes came to believe in Jesus in Jerusalem: even a great many of the priests came to recognize Him as their Messiah (Acts 6:7).

And by the time each of the disciples had laid down their lives for Christ in one way or another, the gospel had been spread far around the world: Peter and Paul died in Rome, while Thomas went as far to the East as India, founding a church that still exists there today. After writing this gospel, Matthew is said to have gone as far south as Ethiopia. And the gospel continues to spread to the very ends of the earth, just as Jesus said it would. Today, there are Christians in every country all around the globe.

So even in America, where the church seems to be in decline, we should never lose hope. For as the parable of the mustard seed makes clear, big things can come from the smallest beginnings. Even a small congregation like this can have a big impact on the community around us, as we work together to show and share the love and the truth of Christ with our neighbors.

And we find even more reason for this hope when we look at the second of Jesus' parables, the parable of the leaven. Now, taken literally, Jesus' words provide quite a challenge even to the most ambitious of bakers – the bushel of meal or flour that He describes would produce enough bread to feed 100 people! Just like this world and its problems, baking such an amount would be overwhelming to anyone.

But how much yeast would it take to make all that bread rise? Just about 2% of the amount of flour. That's not much: and considering that yeast looks very much like flour, when it's mixed in, the lump of dough probably doesn't look any different whether it has yeast in it or not. Perhaps that's why Jesus says that the yeast is "hidden" in the meal – it's invisible. Just like the tiny mustard seed, it's hard to see how something so small, so unobtrusive could possibly make any sort of real difference to the much larger amount of flour.

But anyone who has ever tried to bake bread without enough yeast knows better. It's flat and hard, and not really much good for anything. No, it's the tiny, invisible amount of yeast that makes the bread rise, giving it that light texture, making it a perfect host for butter and jam, or an ideal platform for any kind of sandwich.

So, what is Jesus saying? That even in places where it looks like the Church is in decline, even in places where there are so few Christians that the Church is practically invisible, God's power is still at

work. And that's because of what Jesus promised His disciples in our responsive reading, right before He sent them to the ends of the earth to be His witnesses: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." For it was the Holy Spirit Who fell upon the Church on Pentecost Sunday, transforming those fearful disciples into bold preachers of the gospel. It was the Holy Spirit Who pierced the hearts of the thousands of listeners who came to believe in Christ that day. And it is the Holy Spirit Who continues to fill even the smallest numbers of Christians in even the most dangerous of places today, empowering our words of truth and our deeds of love to draw people to Christ.

Yes, because of the Holy Spirit, the gospel is spreading even in those places where the Church faces the greatest persecution, and thus where the Church has to remain invisible, meeting in secret. In China, even as the government tears down houses of worship, there are 38 million Protestants there: about 3% of the population, and almost double the number of just 10 years ago. And that's just the officially-recognized number, for there may be as many as 22 million more who belong to unregistered, secret, invisible house churches. In Iran, where evangelism is strictly against the law, around 1 million people have already converted from Islam to Christianity, and the secret, invisible, underground Church is growing faster there than anywhere else in the world.

And here in America, campus ministries faithfully proclaim the gospel even in colleges and universities where Marxism and its accompanying "cancel culture" seem to hold absolute sway. In Washington, where hatred and vitriol seem to be at their worst, congressmen of both parties regularly gather for prayer and Bible study. And some of the fastest-growing, healthiest churches in America are located in the largest, most secularized cities.

And that's because of the amazing truth that Jesus' last two parables make clear: God Himself is the greatest treasure anyone can possibly possess. Oh, sure, lots of people would disagree. Marxist economists and capitalist entrepreneurs share the opinion that gaining the things of this world is all that really matters. Militant radicals and backroom deal-makers alike may grasp for political power as their greatest objective. Wine connoisseurs along with potheads and junkies may be united in their devotion to pleasurable sensations. In many different ways, the world may try to convince us that making the most out of this life is the only thing that matters, the only thing that makes sense.

But Jesus tells two stories that should put all of these, and so many other temptations, into proper perspective. For He says that someone who finds the Kingdom of Heaven, someone who has been filled with the very Spirit of Christ has found the greatest thing of all. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that acknowledging Him as our King, enjoying His protection and being filled with His power is worth more than all the wealth, all the power and all the pleasure that this world has to offer. Just as the farmer bought a field in order to possess a hidden treasure, and just as the merchant sold off everything in order to purchase the pearl of great price, knowing and being known by Jesus is worth everything we are and everything we have.

That's why Jesus' first disciples were willing to go as far as Rome and Ethiopia and India to tell people about Jesus, even though proclaiming the gospel eventually cost all of them their lives. That's why millions of Chinese people gather in one another's homes and why Iranian Christians share the good news of Christ in spite of ever-present danger from their hostile governments. Jim Elliot, who gave up his own life in an attempt to spread the gospel to the Huaorani people of Ecuador put it this way: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

So, today, you may feel that you have nothing to offer to the Lord. You may not see any way that you as an individual, or that this small congregation could possibly make a difference in the face of the overwhelming problems that face us. But remember what one mustard seed can become. Remember the amazing power of a tiny amount of yeast. And remember that the Holy Spirit – the One Jesus graciously gives to all who trust in Him as Savior and who bow the knee to Him as Lord – He is the One Who makes it possible for each of us to make a difference for Christ, whoever we are and wherever we live. For He Himself is the greatest treasure any of us could possibly desire.