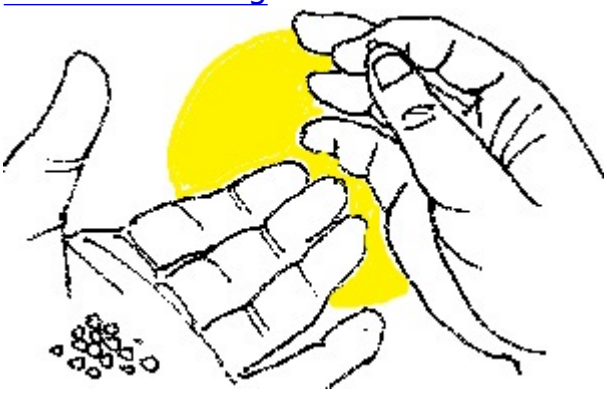
Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“What is the Kingdom of God like?” (Luke 13:18).

Eph 5:22-33; Luke 13:18-21

Hear Then the Parable, a 1989 book by Bernard Brandon Scott, has long been my favorite source for understanding the power of Jesus' parables. The pedagogical value of parables is evident in their many levels of interpretation, from simple images to short narratives loaded with surprising perspectives and secret messages. Today's two short parables provide examples.

According to Scott, many of the images and stories in Jesus' parables were quite subversive. On the surface the parable of the mustard seed is an image of great growth coming from something small. The parable of the yeast offers the same message. Yeast disappears in the dough but has a powerful effect. This is how the Kingdom of God works.

But Scott goes further. Mustard seeds spread airborne to invade fields much as kudzu explodes to take over fields, powerlines and highways. It was no friend to farmers. If allowed to grow into a bush, it gave shelter to birds, another threat to fields and crops. Jesus presents his Kingdom not as the majestic Cedar of Lebanon, a royal symbol of messianic Israel, but instead as a mustard bush that brings trouble. Think of Jesus' Kingdom as a soup kitchen that elicits mixed reactions if located in established neighborhoods.

The parable of the yeast was subversive from the start by focusing on a woman, not the usual subject of parables. Yeast was a mysterious enzyme that formed like mold in old bread held in a moist rag. The woman "hides" this enzyme in the dough in the same way that women have an influence within the community that some men see as mysterious and often counter to their own control. Think of certain men today who call women "nasty" as one expression of male misogyny. Yet, the woman in the parable produces enough bread to feed the whole village. She gives life, like the Kingdom of God.

Jesus preached God's influence as breaking into the normalcy and control of our lives. Find your favorite parable and consider the ways in which it both comforts you and disturbs your comfort with fresh demands. We say we want God's Kingdom to come each time we pray the *Our Father*, itself a parable of God's intimate parental love. Discipleship teaches us to be careful what we pray for, because the answer to our prayers may surprise us and change our lives in radical ways.

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