

# The Scandal of the Kingdom

sermon digest

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46, 34-35

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This past week the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a survey of religious life in the United States, revealing significant changes in the religious landscape surrounding us. Following interviews of more than 35,000 adults, the statisticians conclude that more than a quarter of the American people have left the faith of their childhood for another religion or no religion at all. Add to these, adults who report switching denominations, and the number of those who have left the church of their youth rises to a “conservative estimate” of 44 percent. One in four young adults admit to no affiliation with a religious institution. The majority of the unaffiliated—12 percent of the overall population—describe their religion as “nothing in particular,” but about half of these say faith is at least somewhat important to them. “Right now,” the survey concludes, “there is a dropping confidence in organized religion, especially in the traditional religious forms.”

Do the report’s findings herald good news or bad? Often such an analysis sends us into a hand-wringing mode. But is the loss of confidence in “traditional religious forms” really bad news? Or could it be an opportunity to take a second look at that which has become so traditional, so comfortable and familiar that it calls for little more from us than an occasional nod of assent? Could it be that the unrest that is out there is an opportunity for serious soul searching that could bring us again to the refreshing springs of genuine faith?

**Jesus preached the scandal of the gospel.** We often think of Jesus as the great storyteller. We speak of the simplicity of his parables that addressed a seemingly simple people in simple, familiar terms. Our pleasantries, however, miss the electric shock that Jesus’ parables often sent through his audience; and the warm, comfortable scene we paint fails to take into account that something about this storyteller so enraged the powers of his day that they put him to death. A closer reading of the Gospels reveals that this one who came proclaiming the kingdom of God did not come merely to affirm the status quo. He came to scandalize it.

Have you ever swung from the branches of a mustard tree? Did you perhaps have one in your backyard when you were a child? Probably not. As a matter of fact, students of the Bible have long scratched their heads trying to figure out Matthew’s and Luke’s depiction of the tiny mustard seed’s growing into a tree in which birds make their nests. An annual plant that grew at the very most to be eight or ten feet tall, the mustard plant’s branches did not last long enough, nor were they strong enough to even begin to support a nest. Although we have often solved the problem by concluding that Jesus was merely comparing the smallness of the seed with the greatness of the plant, something more seems to have been involved.

Trees in the Judean landscape were few and far between. A writer in the last century noted that residing in the area had made her appreciative of the frequent reference in Jewish scriptures to the respite found in “the shadow of a rock,” for such a shade was the best that one could find in that barren terrain. Aware of the magnificent cedars of Lebanon, the Hebrew people came to associate great, majestic trees with the powerful empires of the day. Daniel celebrates the destruction of the towering tree of Babylon; and Ezekiel, the proud tree of Assyria. Israel’s fondest dream was that in the last days, God would “bring low the high tree” and “make high the low tree” (Ezekiel 17:24), thus raising Israel to be the greatest of all nations. Enter Jesus, then, pronouncing the hope of the kingdom in a plant that was nothing more than a common, ordinary shrub. What kind of hope was that?

Again, picture Jesus speaking of a woman going about the seemingly ordinary, everyday task of baking. A key that this is no ordinary day, however, lurks in the fact that Jesus mentions that she is working with “three measures of flour”—the equivalent of fifty pounds or flour—enough to make bread for 100 to 150 people. It is the same amount of flour that Sarah prepared for heavenly guests who came to announce the birth of her son (Genesis 18). If you read between the lines, you might see something of a heavenly banquet in the making or better yet, an *epiphany*—an appearing or manifestation of God. The scandal, missed by our modern ears, would not, however, have been missed by Jesus’ hearers. The leaven hidden in the flour, like the kingdom of God hidden in their midst, was a familiar symbol denoting the infectious power of evil and corruption. More than just an innocent reference to magnificent results stemming from small beginnings, it turns the world on its head. It was, David Garland suggests, like saying the kingdom of heaven is like rust or a virus. It is, however, very much in line with the Jesus who pronounces that tax collectors and harlots will enter the kingdom of heaven before chief priests and elders (21:32). And it coincides perfectly with Matthew’s conviction that the kingdom is present in this one who will undergo the scandal of crucifixion.

**This scandalous gospel demands response.** God entered the world in Jesus in a scandalous way. To most eyes the presence of the long awaited kingdom in Jesus’ fledgling movement was no more obvious than an ordinary garden herb. The realm of a king who operates in meekness, riding a donkey instead of a war horse, can well be represented by a lowly garden herb instead of a flourishing tree. The one whose coming opens the door to those who have found themselves locked outside through the centuries can well be represented in the subversive working of leaven, challenging things as they are with hopes for what has never been. Just as quietly and surely as the fermentation of change begins taking root in the lives of those it encounters, the resistance it meets is just

as decisive; and any who truly encounter it must choose their response.

Just as the mustard seed represented the small and seemingly insignificant and leaven represented evil and corruption, so the pearl represented that of greatest value. Jesus' parables of the treasure discovered in the field and the pearl of great price speak of the plowman in the field and the wise merchant who sell all they have to purchase what they know to be of great value. Recalling the experience of Jesus' very own disciples who left all and followed him, they call to us as well. At what cost do we opt for this kingdom? If the cost is negligible, then so we might assume is the value we invest in the treasure. If the way of the kingdom is merely traditional, the comfortable status quo, then it is not the kingdom to which Christ beckoned.

Far too many people in the changing religious make-up of our present society bemoan the passing of a "Christian" nation much in the same way that the church in ages past grieved the passing of Christendom—the era in which the church exercised absolute control over government and all of society. Control, however, is not the way of Christ's kingdom. The one who was born in a manger, made his way into Jerusalem on a donkey and died at the hands of the Roman government is not one who comes to dominate but to serve. The path of discipleship, to be sure, is risky, but it is the way of God's kingdom. In its behalf, we would give everything else that we own and all that we are. Nothing less will do.

And just there, you see, we recover our very souls.