

“Finding God’s Hidden Kingdom”

July 30, 2023

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

About 10 years ago, I discovered recently, with a shock, I bought a book at the Chautauqua Institution bookstore by the theoretical physicist Brian Greene. We were there to hear him speak at a morning lecture about his new (at the time) book *The Hidden Reality*. I like his books and lectures, but I have to admit picking up this book recently, it appears brand new. I don’t understand most of the math when it comes to calculating the shape and density of the cosmos, but I enjoy the descriptions and the theories that have developed over the last 100 years about the origins of the universe and its nature.

This book is explaining the various theories about multiple universes and the possibility that reality is more complex and more mysterious than we’ve ever imagined. And when Greene talks about it in general terms, he sounds like a spiritual guru. He writes, “When you realize that quantum mechanics underlies all physical processes, from the fusing of atoms in the sun to the neural firings that constitutes the stuff of thought, the far-reaching implications of the proposal become apparent. It says that there’s no such thing as a road untraveled. Yet each such road—each reality—is hidden from all others.” Now, Brian Greene is not a spiritual master, in fact I think he’s an atheist, but when he talks about the nature of the physical universe and the limits of our knowledge as we attempt to plumb the depths of reality, he can’t seem to avoid the language of parable and mystery.

If that’s true when you’re working with equations and observable data the way astrophysicists and cosmologists do, then we can understand why Jesus insists on speaking in riddles and imagery instead of direct speech when he talks about God’s kingdom. For Jesus God’s kingdom is a hidden reality that can only be found by our willingness to set aside our assumptions about how the world works or is supposed to work and embrace alternative and often negative images.

Take, for instance, the parable that compares the kingdom to yeast. For most of the New Testament when yeast, or leavening, is mentioned it has negative connotations. At another place in Matthew’s gospel Jesus warns his disciples to beware the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees. It’s used to characterize an influence that is harmful: a rotten apple spoils the whole bushel, we might say. But here, suddenly, Jesus is using the same notion to describe God’s kingdom. Now, as it turns out, the yeast he’s referring to isn’t the little grains we might buy in a store in a little packet. What he’s talking about is more like sourdough starter. Have you ever made sourdough bread? A lot of people took it on during the lock-down a couple of years ago.

I’ve never done it, but I Googled how the other day. It’s not a simple thing to do. It takes time and pretty careful attention to nourish this production of yeast from flour and water. Every day you have to siphon some off and add a little more, keeping it warm and well-ventilated. It’s easy to get it wrong, to spoil it and have to start all over again. So, that’s what Jesus is talking about when he says the kingdom is like yeast.

I read this passage from the Common English Bible translation because it's one of the few that accurately translates what the woman does with the yeast. Jesus says she "hides" it in the flour; so, there's purpose behind her action. Something is being concealed. A hidden element is at work in the flour, affecting what it becomes. And we're talking about a huge amount of flour, 30 to 40 pounds worth. But somehow, through a mysterious process hidden from us, the whole amount will be transformed.

It was a common practice to make bread in that society, I'm sure. No one would have thought the woman was acting deceitfully by hiding the yeast in the flour. But Jesus may not want them to identify with the woman or the yeast. I think he wants them to identify with the flour. I think he's saying there is a hidden reality, a hidden realm, within us that can influence us and even transform us if we give in to it.

Parables are meant to point us to the presence of God's kingdom all around us and to the path of discovering that kingdom within us. If the kingdom can be compared to a mustard seed, we are the birds who can find shelter in the branches. If the kingdom is a treasure, we are the field where it is hidden. If the kingdom is a net, we are among the fish who are caught. There's no end to the metaphors and images but they all involve an interaction, some kind of response. Jesus seems to be saying that God's kingdom is dependent on our cooperation. Without our effort to seek it or give in to it, the kingdom remains hidden, no less real but unrealized.

For Paul, the key to realizing the kingdom lies in the ultimate exchange of love between God and the world through Jesus. "[The One] who did not withhold their own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will [that One] not also give us everything else?" By acknowledging that sacrifice we discover that all the barriers we thought could separate us from God are removed. Nothing in this life or in all of creation can separate us from God's love. Suppose that's the kingdom hidden within us? Maybe we don't need to seek a place or a thing or create certain social conditions to realize God's kingdom. Maybe it's our capacity to love, a hidden quality we've carried all along, that brings God's kingdom to life.

Another of Jesus' parables concerns a man, a merchant, who is seeking pearls, apparently to sell. He finds one that is beyond compare, perfect in every way. In response he sells all the others, he sells everything he has to get that one pearl. In her study of this story in her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine points out that in doing what he does, the merchant is no longer a merchant. He has no intention of selling this pearl; he only wants to make it his own. When we find God's hidden kingdom of love within us, all we want to do is love. We see the world in a whole new way. And we're transformed, we're changed forever. We'd have more luck trying to extract the yeast from the bread than we would separating ourselves from God's kingdom of love once we find it within us.

The life of discipleship isn't meant to be a hardship; it's not meant to be grueling and arduous. Jesus calls us to discover joy, to be immersed in love. There's no special formula for that, no equation we can work out. It comes from a determination to be aware of God's presence, to see the potential that lies within small and ordinary things, like yeast or mustard seeds. When we commit ourselves to that love, we are transformed in ways we never imagined possible. We

can let go of the fears and anxieties that haunt us and keep us closed off to the risks of reaching out to others and embracing those we've been taught to despise.

One of the most powerful elements of Jesus' ministry, I think, as it's presented in the gospels, is his insistence that we carry within us the ability to love as God loves. We are not hopeless cases. We're not beyond redemption. We've been taught for too long to devalue our capacity to find God's kingdom; we've been taught that love is nothing but a distraction to weaken us. Yet it's the only thing motivating God to move toward us. It's the only thing that can lift us from our despair and heal our brokenness. If we're to find God's hidden kingdom, then we must learn to love.

Jesus seems convinced we're capable of doing that. In Paul's understanding God has gone to the ultimate length to demonstrate and model love for us in Christ. The hidden reality of our true nature has been revealed to us. The only thing left is our decision of what to do in response. We can choose not to love, we can choose to ignore or deny our true nature, but in doing that we consign ourselves to a world of fear and sadness, an outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth, as Jesus might say. We're meant for better than that. We're meant for love.

So, choose love, my friends. Come out of the darkness, let what's hidden in you be revealed. Just as nothing can separate you from God's love, so let nothing stand between you and loving the world. The power to find God's hidden kingdom, to reveal it and to live it fully is in your hands. Choose love and be free.

Amen