

Have you ever thought about the role expectations play in your life? Think about a young couple preparing for marriage. Of course, they're looking for the perfect soul mate, someone who accepts them as they are and fulfills all their desires. They want a low maintenance partner who meets their needs and makes almost no claims on them. How's that going to work out? It's all about expectations. That's why Tim and Kathy Keller say, "Simply put—today people are asking far too much in the marriage partner."

Think about the expectation people have when they take a new job. Whenever we hire staff at CPC, I try to have a conversation with them about their expectations of working at a church. They tend to think everyone will walk serenely around with a big smile on their face, passing along blessings and prayers at the water cooler. But it doesn't work that way. The reality is they are going to see what I call the "underbelly" of the church. They're going to discover the church is led by flawed people, who sometimes butt heads! It's all about expectations.

Historian, Daniel Boorstin, suggests Americans suffer from all-too-extravagant expectations. He says, "We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a 'church of our choice' and yet feel its guiding power over us, to revere God and to be God. Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer."

Think with me how this relates to our expectations of God. How do you expect God to work in this world? Have you ever wondered, "Why doesn't God do more?" Tragedies happen. Horrific accidents devastate lives and families. Tyrants and bullies force their will on good people, crushing those who oppose them, and seem to get away with it. And so we ask, why doesn't God do something?

I believe this was the question many of Jesus' disciples were beginning to ask. When it came to the Messiah, they had high expectations. They believed he'd start a revolution to overthrow Rome and begin ruling from Jerusalem. Today is Palm Sunday. Believe me, on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, the crowd of people that lined the

pathway had massive expectations. In Luke's gospel, he says as Jesus neared Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, *"the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once"* (Luke 19:11). Those are some serious expectations! But when nothing happened, except to see their King betrayed, arrested, flogged and crucified, it didn't make any sense.

Why didn't God do something? Why doesn't God do something? Well, in the passage we're looking at today, Jesus answers that question by way of three parables. In each one he begins with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." In other words, the kingdom, which Jesus has inaugurated by his coming, is something like what happens in these stories. Each parable is a picture of how this kingdom works.

The Wheat and the Weeds

First, is the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First, collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24–30)

How does the kingdom of heaven work? It's like this: A farmer sows good seed in his field, but while he and his workers are sleeping, an enemy comes along and sows weeds among the wheat. This was considered a vicious act and a violation of the law. This particular kind of weed is called "darnel." It's a kind of grass that grows only in the wheat fields of the Middle East. It contains a poisonous fungus that ruins crops. The problem is when it first begins to grow it looks a lot like wheat. That's why it wasn't until the wheat sprouted and formed heads that the

darnel was evident. At that point, the farmer's servants offer to root out the darnel, which was the normal thing to do. But the farmer refused for fear they might root out some wheat along with it. He tells them to wait, let the two grow together until the harvest when not they but the harvesters will separate the two.

Now, whenever you study a parable you need to look for surprises in the story, something out of the ordinary. One surprise in this story is how the owner says to wait. Again, the normal thing to do would be to root out the weeds as soon as they're noticed. As we'll see in a moment, one of the things this parable is meant to teach us is to wait, to be patient. It's the strange patience of the farmer that stands out in this parable.

I imagine the disciples were left scratching their heads over this, and it wasn't until later that day when the crowd dispersed and they had some alone time with Jesus they asked him what this story meant.

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear. (verses 36–43)

So Jesus gives them a detailed explanation. The farmer is the Son of Man—that's what Jesus often called himself. So this story is a picture of Jesus' own life and ministry. The field is the world, and the good seed represents people, not all people, but sons of the kingdom; people who belong to the kingdom of heaven. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one—the devil. He's the one who secretly sowed weeds among the wheat. The harvest, of course, is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

In the final judgment, two things will happen: First, the weeds the picture that "everything (everyone) that causes sin and all who do evil" will be pulled up and thrown into the fire. This is biblical imagery of hell. It's not meant to be taken literally as if there will be a real furnace, but it pictures the ultimate torment and sorrow of those who belong to the evil one.

Second, "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." They'll no longer be indistinguishable from the weeds. They'll ripen to a glorious maturity. And notice one

thing—Jesus, the Son of Man, isn't only the One who sows the good seed, he's also the One who oversees the harvest at the end of the age! It's quite a claim Jesus makes here for himself. In the end, he's the ultimate judge of history.

But what does this parable teach us about our expectations? Well, for one it tells us not to expect too much too soon. Why? Because the righteous and the wicked will coexist in the world until the end. This would have stunned the average Jewish person. Once again, when Jesus announced the kingdom of God had arrived with his own coming, the Jewish expectation was evil would be overthrown and there'd be an immediate and absolute division between the good guys and the bad guys; the children of light and the children of darkness. Then Jesus comes along and says, the kingdom of heaven is here, but things are not changing. The ungodly were still doing their thing, just as they are today. Jesus wasn't meeting their expectations. So in the parable, Jesus says, "Look, you **can** expect God to do something, but it won't happen until the end of the age. It won't happen until the harvest. Meanwhile, you can expect the wheat and the weeds, the righteous and the unrighteous, to coexist in this world. You have to be patient. My kingdom is here, but it's not completely fulfilled. So you need to be prepared to live and grow in an environment that's not ideal."

It's interesting, Christians through the centuries have had different ways of dealing with this reality. There have been Christ-followers who've felt it was their mission to do exactly what Jesus says here **not** to do—kill or root out all the weeds—**now!** Have you ever heard of the Crusades? Medieval Christians killed the adherents of Islam and tried to root out the weeds. Today, we see remnants of this thinking among those who resort to violence to root out evil in our society. Murder a doctor who performs abortions? Why not? Engender hatred and violence towards gay people? Why not? But Jesus says don't do that. You might be distressed by what's going on around you, but be patient and wait.

The reason for this is quite clear. Jesus says, "While you're pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them." In other words, you'll do more damage than good. You can't be trusted to get it right. You see the harvest hasn't completely ripened yet, so the wheat and the weeds are hard to tell apart. The bottom line is we don't always know what's in a person's heart, so not only does this parable teach us patience, it teaches us humility. And guess what? Part of the problem is some of the evil we want to root out exists in our own hearts! So we can just hand this job over to God.

It seems to me, God is far more patient than I am. I want to weed now, but God says he'll take care of it later. We serve what we might call a slow God. Most of us want a fast God; one who acts quickly. But God is slow. He's slow in judging the wicked. And the reason for that is he longs for them to turn to him before it's

too late. You see, he loves them; he loves weeds! And we were all weeds once. So God is slow, at least according to our timetable, but not according to his. Listen to what the apostle Peter said, *“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:8, 9). Isn't it odd that God is more patient with sinners than we are?

An old story is told about Abraham. He was sitting outside his tent one day when an old man, weary from his journey, approached him. Abraham greeted him warmly, washed his feet and fed him. Abraham noticed the man ate without saying a blessing. So he asked the old man, “Don't you worship God?” The old man replied, “I worship only the fire.” Abraham became very angry and threw the old man out of his tent and into the cold. After the man had left, God asked Abraham where the man had gone. And Abraham said, “I threw him out because he didn't worship you.” And God said, “Abraham, I have suffered this man for 80 years. Could you not endure him for one night?” You see God is slow in judging the wicked. Shouldn't we be as well?

God says to wait, but what do we do as we wait? Another way Christ-followers have dealt with the reality of weeds has been to retreat. To somehow try to build our own protected enclave where we don't have to deal with any weeds. Instead of conquering them we just run from them and try to find or create a weedless environment in which to live and raise our kids. I mean here we are living on the SF Peninsula, one of the most weed infested areas in the entire nation. Some people think, what an awful place to live! How can you grow and thrive there as a follower of Jesus? How can you raise your kids to be God-fearing people in that godless environment? But that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, “I'm the sower and that's where I planted you. And, yes, you must be discerning and careful. Yes, there are things to protect your kids from. Yes, you do need to resist evil. But you can grow there; you can still bear fruit in that environment.” You see, that is another surprise in this story; in the end, there **is** still a harvest of wheat. The weeds did **not** destroy the wheat. You don't have to move to Kansas. You can live, grow, and bear fruit right here in the midst of lots of weeds!

And, by the way, what's true of the world is also true of the church. The church has some weeds in it too. If you're looking for a weedless church, you are going to be doing a lot of church hopping, because you'll never be satisfied. That doesn't mean we shouldn't hold one another accountable. That doesn't mean we don't confront sin in the church. Jesus will teach us about church discipline a few chapters later in Matthew 18. But the truth of the matter is we have to be patient with one another as well. We have to be patient with a Christian community that's far from ideal.

So we can't pull the weeds out and we can't retreat, either. What do we do? Do we just do nothing, or can we really make a difference? That's where these little additional parables come in, which are sandwiched between the parable and the explanation. These two poignant little stories not only tell us to be patient but they give us hope for change.

The Mustard Seed and Yeast

First, is the parable of the mustard seed.

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” (verses 31–32)

This is a parable of slow growth. The kingdom of God starts out like a mustard seed, which is about a millimeter in diameter. To say, “like a mustard seed,” was a proverbial way back then of saying something is very small. But, despite its smallness, it grows and grows and grows. From a tiny beginning, the mustard plant can grow to over ten feet and become sturdy enough for birds to perch its branches.

What's the point? Jesus the Messiah comes on the scene, and everyone expected a revolution. Even John the Baptist said the Messiah would come with a huge blade in his hand and clear the threshing floor! But, what happened? Jesus arrived as an infant without a palace or a sword. He was raised in an obscure town by peasants. His ministry began and although he performed great miracles and taught with great authority, he told people to stay silent about it. He gathered around him a little band of disciples, none of whom were very impressive—fishermen, tax collectors, even prostitutes. In the end, he was rejected by the religious leaders and hung helpless on a Roman cross.

Jesus was indeed very small, but that's not the end of the story. The mustard seed grows and grows and eventually becomes so large that birds perch in its branches. What started so unimpressively has become a great kingdom. The birds represent all the nations of the earth, not just Jews but Gentiles, gathering under the protection of this King. Think about it. The Roman Empire no longer exists, but the kingdom of heaven, that little seed Jesus planted 2,000 years ago, has grown into a tree. The Egyptian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Aztec Empire, and the Ottoman Empire are all gone; but this kingdom Jesus ushered in continues to grow in all the nations of the earth.

This says something about our own strategy. How do we make a difference in the world? It is not with a sword; not by power and might; not even by the voting booth. Compared to all these things the gospel seems very small. But this parable tells us we can embrace the smallness of the gospel with complete confidence in Jesus Christ himself. Any addition of power we try to

add to Christ himself subtracts from our confidence in the all-sufficiency Christ. We can celebrate the wondrous smallness of Jesus who emptied himself and took upon himself the form of a slave because we believe in the end every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord of all.

While the story of the mustard seed celebrates smallness, the next parable celebrates hiddenness.

He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." (verse 33)

The yeast is hidden in flour and water and transforms it into bread. Though it can't be seen, it totally transforms the moist flour into dough that's ready for baking. In the same way, the kingly reign of Jesus is hidden, but over time, its lively effect will be seen and even tasted by many!

You see, both of these parables are about things that start small and hidden, inconspicuous as we say, but with patience and time, they make a great impact. This is a great encouragement to me as a pastor and it should be to all of us in the body of Christ. We've been planted or hidden right here on the San Francisco Peninsula. Appearances can be deceiving. We may be small, we may be hidden, we may be outnumbered, but we trust this message of the kingdom to take root and spread to impact many. That should encourage you as well as you go to work tomorrow, or as you care for your children, your parents, or your neighbors. Don't disdain smallness or hiddenness. Despite appearances, the kingdom of God is at work and will ultimately triumph.

This has encouraged me as Lynn and I are starting our fourth season as chaplains for the SF Giants. Talk about starting small. Talk about being hidden and even invisible. Our first year with the Giants we led chapel meetings on home Sundays, and we both led separate Bible studies on home Tuesdays. Honestly, we made no discernible difference. There were several weeks I had just one guy in my Bible study. I felt invisible. As we ended our first year, I reflected on the fact that not one member of the team had ever asked a question about me. About halfway through our second season, we began to feel known, and to a small degree trusted and embraced. We still weren't making a big splash. Now I had two or three coming to my Bible study! But progress was being made. Last year, as we endured a terrible season on the field for the Giants, but there were signs of fruit being born off the field with both the players and their wives or girlfriends. Now I had seven in my Bible study and Lynn had even more. What we do with baseball chapel is still small and it's still somewhat hidden, but it's making a difference. These twin parables of slow but sure growth encourages us to be patient and trust that God will continue to do his work and will make an eternal difference.

Be encouraged. Despite appearances, the kingdom of God is at work and will ultimately triumph. God is doing something in this world, something good and right, but never on our timetable. So, be patient and trust that he's at work, though in small and hidden ways. We can have hope. We who are hidden and small, those who are made righteous by Jesus Christ, will shine like the bright Middle Eastern sun in all its glory. We can have hope but hope that takes its own sweet time.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.