

## ***The Secret Message of Jesus - Subtle Revolution***

Lesson: Luke 13:18-21

What does a King look like? (*show pics of famous kings, ending with silhouette of robed man on donkey*)

The king we've been talking about for the last 6 weeks, and the last 2000 years, didn't look much like a king. He was from a backwater town that hadn't produced anything worthwhile in a thousand years. He owned nothing. He had no home. In his most triumphant moment, he was riding a donkey. Not an elephant. Not a camel. Not a horse. A donkey.

He didn't ascend to the throne in the normal ways: David became a king by stealing the throne from one king and assassinating another. Solomon had his older brother executed. Macbeth killed off his king, as did half the English rulers. Louis XIV gained the throne of France when he was five. Henry VII lured King Richard onto the battlefield, got his allies to defect, and slew him (along with lots of others). Even Herod the Great, who rebuilt the Temple the first time, was appointed by the Romans into his position.

This king has been the king since before there was a world to rule. His kingdom has never been fully established on earth. People have tried to establish God's kingdom: they've claimed land, championed revolutions, built temples, raised earthly monarchs, instituted theocracies, utilized martial rule, started wars. But because their efforts were always about them and not about the king himself, they failed.

What does a revolutionary look like? (*show pics of famous revolutionaries, including Che and Rambo*)

The people of the first century expected their messiah – their savior – to be a really powerful version of David, of Solomon, of Caesar. They expected him to save them from his white steed, wielding a sword and the vengeance of the almighty. They expected him to build an army and take it into a violent revolution that would turn over all the other kings once and for all.

Does that kind of revolutionary turn into the kind of king you would willingly serve?

In his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, which we're reading together, Brian McLaren asks: "What is the alternative (to an empire, or a violent and forceful coup)? Could the kingdom of God come with bigger weapons, sharper swords, more clever political organizing? Could the kingdom of God be a matter of what is often called *redemptive violence*? Or would that methodology corrupt the kingdom of God so it would stop being "of God" at all and instead become just another earthly (and perhaps in some sense demonic) principality or power? Perhaps the kingdom could come with flawless, relentless, irresistible logic – a juggernaut of steamroller counterarguments to flatten every objection. Or would that mental conquest be [just as] dominating as military conquest, reducing the kingdom of God to a kingdom of coercive stridency?... "

[slide] "What if the only way for the kingdom of God to come in its true form – as a kingdom "not of this world" – is through weakness and vulnerability, sacrifice and love?"<sup>1</sup>

That king on the donkey, that king who spoke of reconciliation, of active and powerful love, that king who was willing to be humiliated and crucified in order to show that he meant what he said – could his

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (W Publishing Group: 2006), p. 69.

kingdom come in any other way but through “weakness and vulnerability, sacrifice and love?” Just as the king himself did?

Rather than its coming into reality through bloody tumult or oppressive law, the kingdom of this king, the kingdom of God, is coming into the world by stealth. It has already been established – Jesus tells us over and over that the kingdom of God is at hand – not off in some past or future time, not in another country or another world, but here and within reach. But the kingdom of God will not conquer by fiat or force or fear. The kingdom of God will come into the world by being revealed.

The kingdom of God is not a foreign thing, imposed upon us. It is organically grown. It is a world among us. The kingdom of God is manifested by the lives of the king’s people. It comes into visibility as one by one, we choose to be in reconciling, loving, interactive relationship with God and each other.

Because it comes about as lives change, one by one, the kingdom manifests a tiny bit at a time, slowly, as people choose to be in it. The establishment of God’s kingdom on earth comes through a subtle revolution, brought about by revolutionaries who look a lot more like you and me than like Che Guevara or Rambo.

[slide] The kingdom of God is incarnated through us, seeing and living like Jesus.

"What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?" Jesus asked. And answered, "It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches." Have you seen a mustard seed lately? They’re small and tough. When they are planted they are lost in the dirt. It’s not like a daffodil bulb that you can find and dig up. Or an acorn that might be spotted lying on top of the ground. Mustard seeds, when planted, are hidden. Mustard seeds seem to become part of their environment. But when they are fertile, they grow into bushes that in turn spread seed, some of which is taken by birds to far off places, some of which disappears into the soil, into the environment, and in turn sprouts, grows, and spreads seed.

But if you were looking at the soil, you wouldn’t necessarily know that a mustard seed was in front of you. Che Guevara you would notice. Vladimir Lenin you would notice. Rambo would be hard to miss. But you might miss a single mustard seed or a follower of Jesus. But the effects of that mustard seed, the effects of a follower of Jesus, are harder to miss.

“Again Jesus asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."” Yeast is tiny – the largest yeast in a dough is just 10 thousandths of a millimeter in size. It is absolutely unnoticeable when surrounded by flour. But yeast is alive – it grows, it breathes, it turns ground-up seeds and water into delicate and delicious bread. Yeast makes the ordinary into the staff of life. And a little yeast can stir up a lot of bread.

So when Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like mustard seed, is like yeast, he is saying that it comes about through people who live in a new way – who live as participants in the kingdom. They live in that new way even when others don’t get it, don’t commend them for it, and nothing seems to change. The ones who live as participants in the kingdom of God – the revolutionaries – live the way they do because they have chosen to be in interactive and loving relationship with God the eternal king and with the king’s people.

The kingdom comes about through the subtle revolution that is simply about living in a new way. I’ve been calling the people who choose to live this way “revolutionaries”. Brian McLaren calls them the “secret agents of the secret kingdom”.

The revolutionaries, the secret agents, you and I, are the ones who choose to no longer identify with the earthly kings of force and fiat and fear. The secret agents identify with the king of this hidden kingdom. Agents of the kingdom, you and I, see their primary identity – their citizenship, if you will – in relationship to Jesus and to other people. They understand themselves not as primarily American or primarily male or primarily mothers or primarily executives. The ones scattering the grain, stirring the flour, sharing the word are the “teachers, politicians, lawyers, engineers, and salespeople who take seriously their identity as participants in the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

If you want to bring about a world of compassion, reconciliation, interaction, humanity, humility, vulnerability, communion, and connection, you have to identify primarily with the One, the only One, whose entire message and entire life was spent in that kingdom, right here on earth.

Being a follower of Jesus, being a Christian, is about identifying primarily with Christ. If your primary identity is Euro or American or female or daughter or spouse or bank-teller or bisexual or Green, or all of those before you get to “Christian”, you’re not being all you could be in the kingdom of God. I don’t mean you’re being bad or evil. I mean that, when you have to make a choice, you will choose based on your interests as a white American female Green Party bank teller, which may or may not coincide with your desire to unveil and incarnate the kingdom.

That’s why the kingdom is not about religion, per se. It is all about God, and Christ, and us.

It’s not about formalized systems of organization. Denominations don’t matter. Buildings don’t matter. Hierarchies don’t matter. Tradition doesn’t matter. Not even fascinating questions of microtheology matter. Being an agent of the secret kingdom is about – and only about -- “living in an interactive loving relationship with [the king] and others as a daily way of life”. Around here we call that communion and community: communion with Christ and community with others. That’s the seed, the yeast, the revolution that brings on the kingdom.

How to become a revolutionary, or as McLaren calls it, a secret agent of the secret kingdom? Approach the activities of your daily life with your true identity. Start with a statement: I am an agent of the kingdom of God. And then discover how you can align and act from your identity.

McLaren tells the story of a man named Carter, a 75-year-old taxi driver in Washington DC. In 1994, Carter drove for a man from Malawi, Africa. At that point, he would have been in his 60s.

“Because Carter wasn’t ‘just a taxi driver’ but instead was ‘a taxi driver in the kingdom of God,’ he treated his guest with special respect as only a taxi driver in the kingdom of God can. The guest introduced Carter to some other Malawian friends, and soon Carter the taxi driver was invited to visit Malawi, which he did, in 1998.

There, Carter saw poverty he had never before imagined. He prayed, “Lord, help me bring some joy to this village.” And God answered his prayer. First, Carter [the taxi driver] realized that there was no road in the village – just a narrow path, rutted and muddy.... With a proper road, people could get around better, and elderly and sick people could be transported to the hospital. He had brought some money, so he offered to pay for gas and oil and drivers if the people of the village would do the work. Soon Carter’s generous spirit – the spirit of the kingdom of God – became contagious, and someone provided a grader and then more and more people volunteered to help. Three days later, they had built a proper road a mile and a quarter long....

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 82-83.

The next year, he went back again and this time helped some young men improve their farming. (Carter is not an agriculturist, but he used money he had saved from his job as a taxi driver for the kingdom of God to buy them some additional seeds.)

He made connections and got twenty-six soccer balls donated to the children of the village, because in the kingdom of God, fun and play are important things. Carter knew this. He even helped them get uniforms, because in the kingdom of God, dignity and pride are important things.

On another trip, Carter the taxi driver's generosity inspired a shopkeeper in the village to donate money to help some sick children get treatment for ringworm. Soon a Bible school was launched, and it grew from seventeen to eighty-five students quickly... when you see signs of the kingdom of God coming to your village, you want to learn all you can about it.

Roads, rides, seeds, ringworm medicine, soccer balls and uniforms, a Bible school – these are all signs of the kingdom of God in that little village. Carter told [McLaren], 'I don't do any of this myself. God is doing it through me.'

What would it look like for you to claim your true identity as an agent of the kingdom of God, and to live that identity throughout your life?

- You'd have to rethink your life, and be open to everything changing. It won't all change, but you have to be open to having been wrong about some things, including some of the identities you've been clinging to.
- You'd have to trust God, because if everything you have been doing might be wrong, you're going to need to trust God to help set it right.
- You'd have to be open to God's actually helping you – you have to be receptive to God's love, forgiveness, acceptance, challenge, strength, creativity, and healing. You have to be receptive of God's Spirit.
- You would go public in your new and true identity. If you're hiding, you're not going to be able to actually follow Jesus: you'll be stuck in your closet or your old life. Going public means you start actively identifying with Jesus, with the kingdom of God, and with others who are seeking and participating in the kingdom with you.
- Then you would practice what Jesus taught: both the ideals and the spiritual practices themselves. Through the practices, you would develop your spiritual strength and your faith-filled fortitude, and your capacity for living this revolutionary new way would increase.
- And you would live it.

If you're a student, you might spend an hour or two a week lovingly and laughingly tutoring other students who are struggling. You might save enough money to buy a book for someone who can't afford all her books. You might gather other students to do a street and sidewalk cleanup of the neighborhood surrounding your school.

If you're a corporate vp who has claimed his true identity as an agent of the kingdom of God, you would be looking to align your company to participate in the kingdom of God. In some circles this is called the double bottom line – working not only for the company's monetary value, but also for its community value and its community values within the company. "You seek to lead your company in such a way that

your employees and clients can get a taste of God's kingdom in the fairness, diligence, integrity, teamwork, respect, pride, and fun they experience at your company."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe everything about your life is terrible right now. Your job is boring, or you're unemployed. Your marriage is struggling. Your health is shaky. You're grieving, or anxious, or hurting. What would happen – how would it change your life and the lives of those around you – if you saw all these things as a participant in the kingdom of God? How would you do your boring job differently? Would you treat your spouse with more respect, seeing your marriage as a holy thing, sacred, and him or her as worthy of your care? Would you stop resenting your body, and the doctors and nurses and pharmacists and friends who try to help? Would you get help from God and others with your emotional pain, so you could move outside yourself?

Maybe your neighborhood is on a decline. As a participant in the kingdom of God, what could you do to build communion and community there?

The kingdom of God is nothing more nor less than a return of earth to Eden, a feast in the presence of every human being, a party with God, and a reconciliation of humankind to each other and to God. "This is the glorious hope for which we have all been waiting so long... The secret message of Jesus is meant not just to be heard or read but to be seen in human lives, in radically inclusive reconciling communities, written not on pages in a book but in the lives and hearts of friends."<sup>4</sup>

What does a revolutionary agent of the kingdom of God look like? How about this: (*show pics of ordinary people, then our people doing mission and volunteer work*)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 101-02.

## Lesson

This morning's lesson is from the gospel according to Luke. Luke is the third book of the New Testament, which is about 2/3 of the way through the Bible. Open your Bible to the book of Luke. If you need a Bible, raise your hand and a host will bring one to you, or you can use the one under your chair. We are reading two short parables from chapter 13, beginning at verse 18. I will be reading from the translation known as the New International Version. *(Give people time to find it.)*

The gospel of the Lord according to Luke, chapter 13

Then Jesus asked [the crowd], "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."