

You know one of the little things I miss most in this pandemic? Not the big things, like health and security and spending time with friends and family (of course I miss all that)... but you know one of the little things I miss? Going to the movies. I used to love going to the movies. The smell of popcorn. The 3D glasses. Even the previews. I used to love going to the movies. I know some of the theaters are open now, and they're doubling down on social distancing and cleaning procedures, but I just haven't felt comfortable going back yet. It seems like an unnecessary risk. So I haven't been to the movies in months.

Instead, we've been turning to Redbox and Netflix and the pile of DVDs we have stacked on the shelf. Ellie and Noah usually choose what we watch, so often as not it's an animated feature on our screen. *Abominable*. *Moana*. *Minions*. *The Grinch*. And recently, *The Lego Batman Movie*.

The last time we watched *Lego Batman*, I may have fallen asleep partway through... but I saw the beginning of the movie! And in the beginning of *The Lego Batman Movie*, after Batman does all of his karate-chopping and Batmobile-driving, after he thwarts the evil schemes of the Joker (again), he heads back to his Batcave, back to Wayne Manor, back to his nearly empty palace of a house... totally alone. And while his loyal butler, Alfred, tries to get Batman to see the value of sharing his life with someone else -- with *anyone* else -- Batman insists: Batman works alone.

And actually, it seems like that's how all the superheroes work, right? Superman works alone. Spiderman has no sidekick. They all have their romantic love interests, of course... and later, Batman begrudgingly teams up with Robin... but overall, it seems like these classic superheroes prefer to work alone.

Why is this important? Here in church, throughout the past couple of months, we've been talking about heroes -- unlikely heroes, the most seemingly unqualified, untalented, unexpected, unlikely servants whom God uses to do incredible things in God's world. Today, as we close out this sermon series, we turn to one last unlikely hero: none other than Jesus himself. (Make that "unlikely superhero." This is Jesus we're talking about.) Now, you might be thinking: *why is Jesus an "unlikely" hero? He's Jesus. Son of God. Miracle worker. Saved all humanity from our enslavement to sin and thwarted the very power of death. Pretty heroic stuff. So why would we call Jesus an "unlikely" hero at all?*

Fair point, but let me say this: we have the benefit of hindsight, two-thousand-years'-worth of hindsight... so when we look at Jesus, we see a hero. But without that hindsight, in Jesus' time and Jesus' day? Jesus' unchallenged "hero" status becomes a little less obvious. Jesus just doesn't conform to the world's expectations of a hero... or, for that matter, the world's expectations of a teacher, or a leader, or a savior, or a king. Just think about it. Jesus the "Teacher" doesn't answer questions; he responds with more questions. Jesus the "Leader" leads a group of twelve fair-weather disciples who bicker among themselves and desert him at the first signs of trouble. Jesus the "Savior" (in the eyes of those crucifying him) can't even save himself. And Jesus the "King"... well, according to popular expectations and prevailing biblical interpretations, he was supposed to ride in on a white horse, overthrow the oppressive powers that be, and establish God's unending reign on earth... but even after everything that he does, the powers that be are still in power, God's unending reign sounds more like a distant

dream, and the “white horse” he rides in on is a hijacked donkey. Jesus doesn’t conform to our expectations of what a “likely” *anything* should be, let alone a likely hero.

Clearly, there are any number of reasons why we can call Jesus an unlikely hero... but as I think about Jesus, with Lego Batman there in the back of my mind, the thing that makes him least like those typical superheroes, the thing that most makes him an “unlikely hero,” is this: Jesus doesn’t work alone. He’s not like Batman. Jesus doesn’t work alone. He takes time to be on his own, and does some things on his own (I mean, who else is going to help him calm a stormy sea?), but on the whole, Jesus doesn’t work alone. He doesn’t work alone, especially in his most important work. It’s the work that he’s about from the beginning. We read of it in our first scripture reading for today, in the Gospel of Matthew:

[Matthew 4:18-23, NRSV]

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

There it is. First order of business. Right after he begins his public ministry, right after he starts calling his first disciples, Jesus gets down to business: the business of teaching, of healing, and of “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23, NRSV).

Jesus' focus on the kingdom can't be overstated. He talks about it constantly, teaches and preaches about it constantly. But what is it? What is this "kingdom of God"? Simply put: it is God's truest intentions for God's world. It's a reality that is marked by justice and righteousness and lasting peace. And it's not just some far-off reality, some distant dream. Jesus teaches that this kingdom is among us, within us... here in the present, full of possibility.

Jesus is all about the kingdom. He preaches it, teaches about it, and proclaims it. He embodies it. He tells more parables about the kingdom than just about any other subject. The kingdom has small beginnings, like a tiny mustard seed. The kingdom has great value, like a pearl of great price. The message of the kingdom must be tended and nurtured, like a seed sown in good soil. Parable after parable after parable about the kingdom. And in another one of these parables, Jesus reminds us: Jesus may be all about the kingdom, but Jesus doesn't do this work alone.

We find that parable in our second scripture reading for today.

[Matthew 13:33-35, NRSV]

³³He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

³⁴Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'

Here in this brief little parable, Jesus talks about familiar things. Flour. Yeast. Bread. But being familiar with the "stuff" of the parable might make us quick to overlook some of the details within it. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast..." (Matthew 13:33, NRSV). Here, Jesus isn't talking about those little

individually-wrapped packets of yeast that you find in the supermarket refrigerated section. He's talking about something more like the sourdough starters that were all over social media in the early weeks of covid-tide.¹ Have you ever worked with a bread dough starter like that? Warm and doughy... a little sour-smelling... but a good smell, like you know it's going to turn into something wonderful. In the scriptures, yeast often has kind of a negative connotation, like something that contaminates. ("Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees!" Jesus says later in this same gospel.) But not here.² Here, the yeast is an essential part of the lead-up to something wonderful.

And then the next part: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in..." (Matthew 13:33, NRSV). It's a weird word that's used there, that word where our Bibles read "mixed." The Greek word, literally, means something like "hid" or "concealed"... as in "like yeast that a woman took and *hid*..." But there's meaning in that, I think. The beginnings of the kingdom are small and difficult to perceive... hidden, almost... but full of possibility. Modern translations usually render that word "mixed" or "kneaded" because that's what you do with yeast in dough, right? You don't hide it. You knead it. I'm a total waste in the kitchen, and even I know that. But there's meaning in that, too. This kingdom stuff is like kneading. It requires rolling up your sleeves, diving in, and getting a little messy.

But then there's the rest of it. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour" (Matthew 13:33, NRSV). Flour. Three measures of flour. In case you were wondering, "three measures" of flour isn't the biblical equivalent of "three cups" of flour. It's like ten gallons of flour, enough to make

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 111.

² Levine, 116.

bread for at least a hundred people.³ It's way too much dough for one person to knead, and way too much bread for one person to eat.⁴ Hear that again: It's way too much dough for one person to knead, and way too much bread for one person to eat.

It's such a short parable, just one little sentence... but in it, Jesus packs so much meaning. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast... and as it bubbles up, we know something wonderful is coming. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid (its beginnings are hard to see) or mixed (it requires some sleeves rolled up, some hands getting messy, some good and honest work). The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in three measures of flour... which is way too much for any one person to manage. Here in this parable, we learn: the kingdom is something wonderful, something that starts small, something with beginnings that are hard to see, something that requires hard work and getting messy, something that is too much for any one of us to handle.

I love bread. I could never do one of those no-carb diets. Life without bread... I can't even... nope, not an option. But here's the thing about bread: it doesn't come to be all on its own. You don't find it in nature. Wheat doesn't spontaneously ferment and knead itself and rise into loaves. Bread takes work, human work, human effort. Bread doesn't become bread all on its own.

Neither does the kingdom, Jesus teaches us. The kingdom doesn't just become the kingdom all on its own. It takes work... even human work, human effort. Jesus? He's hard at work. But here's the thing we learn from our unlikely hero Jesus (among many, many other things): Jesus doesn't work alone. He invites us and calls us and

³ M. Eugene Boring, "The Book of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8, ed. Leander E. Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 309.

⁴ Levine, 121.

frankly expects us to dedicate ourselves to this same work of the kingdom, to roll up our sleeves and get a little messy and get to work. What was it we heard in our meditation? “We do our work for Jesus and with Jesus.” And we all do it, thank goodness, because this work to which Jesus calls us is too much for any one of us to handle.

Jesus calls us to join him the work of the kingdom, a kingdom of justice and righteousness and lasting peace. He tells us that the kingdom is within us, and then calls us to act like we really believe that’s true. He calls us to show mercy (even when no one expects us to), to reach out with compassion (even when we don’t necessarily feel like it), to stand up and speak out for justice (even when we’re afraid). He calls us to do this, even in small ways. After all, the work of the kingdom -- like bread -- starts small. The work of the kingdom -- like bread -- is too much for any one of us to handle. (Well, it depends on how much bread. I can eat a lot of bread.) And the work of the kingdom -- like bread -- isn’t going to happen all on its own.

Today, with this brief little parable about familiar things like yeast and flour and mountains of bread, our unlikely hero Jesus teaches us that we are called to work for the sake of the kingdom, that we are called to be unlikely heroes, too. To be an “unlikely hero” isn’t just some nice option for us. It’s our identity, and it’s a necessity.

So let’s get to it, heroes. This week, let’s ask ourselves: what have I been doing to make God’s kingdom a reality? And going forward, even this very week, what one thing am I *going* to do? And then... let’s roll up our sleeves, get our hands messy, devote ourselves to simple and even small acts of mercy and compassion and justice... and then, let’s watch that kingdom rise.