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DIVINE MOSQUITOS  
Luke 13:18-21

*Forbes* magazine puts out a list of the 100 most powerful people in the world. I was looking at the list they published late last year. The first 4 on it were President Obama, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, Vladimir Putin, Russian president and Bill Gates of Microsoft. It's a little scary that #63 on the list is Joaquin Guzman Loera, head of the Sinaloa drug cartel. But there was something about that list that caught my attention. Fifth on the list was Pope Benedict. That tells you something about power on this earth. Along those lines #48 on the list was Hugo Chavez, former president of Venezuela, now deceased and utterly powerless.

Maybe a more interesting list about power is put out by a website called 24/7 Wall Street. They have a list of the 100 least powerful people in the world. Now on that list are Tony Hayward, former CEO of BP, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest company in the world. After the massive blowout in the Gulf he was fired. Then there's Jim Keyes, former CEO of Blockbuster. You will also find Mike Jones, CEO of MySpace, which used to be a huge social networking enterprise until Facebook came along. And of course the Governor is on the list. Just looking at those lists suggests that power in this world is a fleeting thing. Today I want to talk about a totally different kind of power. It's a power we can experience. It's the power of the Kingdom of God and we'll learn about it in Luke 13:18-21.

THE KINGDOM SEEMS INSIGNIFICANT BUT BECOMES HUGE

What exactly is the kingdom of God? A kingdom is that domain in which a king rules. Laurie once went with Toby and a group he was part of on a missions trip to Fiji and Tonga. Tonga is officially Pule'anga Fakatui o' Tonga, the Kingdom of Tonga. It is ruled by a king. The current King is Aho'eitu Unuaki'otonga Tuku'aho, also known as Tupou VI. I assume they usually call him Tupou VI because if they had to say Aho'eitu Unuaki'otonga Tuku'aho every time they introduced him people would get old and die before they ever got anything done.

Tupou VI reigns over some islands in the South Pacific that are home to 106,000 people who consider him their king. Should Tupou come here and command you to pay taxes to him, what would you do? If you are a particularly courteous person you might politely decline to acquiesce to his request. If you are not as courteous your response might range from laughing at him to just ignoring him. Aho'eitu Unuaki'otonga Tuku'aho can command his 100,000 subjects to pay taxes because

they are in his realm. But he has no power over you and me. He cannot make us do a single thing because his rule does not extend to the United States.

So what is the kingdom of God? It is that realm where God rules. As far as his rule extends, that's how far his kingdom extends. In one sense all of creation is his kingdom because he is sovereign over all of it. Yet God has allowed a mutiny to take place in his realm. Parts of it are rebelling against him, refusing to let him rule. At least they think they are refusing his rule. For the time being he is allowing them to live in disobedience to him, within certain limits.

So right now God's rule is not total here on earth. There are people on earth living in defiance and disobedience to him, refusing to acknowledge his rule over them. They are living outside his kingdom. His kingdom on earth right now exists as far as his rule extends in our lives and in the church, and some day it will be absolute over all the earth. In this passage Jesus tells people what the coming of that kingdom would be like. They thought they knew, but what Jesus said here was more than a little startling.

In this little parable Jesus depicted the kingdom of God as being like a mustard seed, then like leaven or yeast. A mustard seed is tiny. It is 1/20<sup>th</sup> of an inch long. Eight mustard seeds would be about the size of a grain of rice. It is not literally the smallest seed in the world, but it is surely one of the smallest. Furthermore, it is a seed. Honestly, seeds are not very impressive. They are often, like the mustard seed, small. And they mostly appear to be inert. They don't give off beams of light. They don't explode with enormously destructive power. They don't make loud noises. They don't emit intense heat. In fact, they don't seem to *do* anything. You can put a seed on your desk and watch it to see what will happen. You'll get bored quickly, because nothing will happen.

You simply bury a seed in the ground. That's not very exciting. Jesus said the kingdom of God is going to be sort of like that. It doesn't seem to be very impressive. It's not very big and will seem for all the world to be powerless. Similarly yeast isn't a particularly dynamic appearing thing. For my birthday breakfast Laurie made a family classic, her yummy cinnamon rolls. She makes them from that Bridgford frozen dough. It has yeast in it. You can't even tell. It's not obvious. It's quiet. And there's only a little bit of yeast in the dough. But that yeast has a big effect. She starts it off with this little strand of dough, yet after some time sitting out it rises and produces this nice big long batch that makes quite a few cinnamon rolls. Somehow the yeast impacts the whole thing. One recipe I found required only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a teaspoon of yeast to impact an entire loaf of bread.

In the case of both the seed and the yeast they have an astounding effect. The seed gets buried in the ground and without any noise or fanfare it sprouts and begins growing a plant. Jesus says it becomes a tree. Technically a mustard plant is a large bush, but it can grow as high as 10 feet tall or more. Jesus' point is that even though its seed starts out as something tiny and seemingly insignificant it grows into something very large. Similarly the yeast somehow impacts every part of a lump of dough, causing it to rise and become something greater than it earlier was.

This is a pattern with the Kingdom of God. God acts to establish his kingdom here on earth. It begins with the birth of a baby! Not some prodigy, some all knowing all powerful infant, just a baby. All right if this kingdom is going to start with a baby it had better be an important and notable baby. Maybe the child of some king or some conquering hero. God had another idea. The kingdom plan began with a baby born in questionable circumstances to two non-entities, a common laborer and his teenage wife who would eventually live in a backwater village.

Well he became somebody when he grew up, right? Yes, but not what anyone would expect. He wasn't a political leader. He had no realm that he ruled. He didn't overpower or conquer anyone. He certainly led in a spiritual sense, but he never had an established position in any organization. He was an itinerant preacher who wandered the countryside for a mere three years then suffered an ignominious end, being executed like the worst of criminals. Generally speaking if you want to start a kingdom the best way to do is not to die right off the bat. But that's what Jesus did. That's a pretty humble beginning. Being executed as one of the worst of criminals is not anyone's concept of power. Hanging on that cross Jesus, the king of this new kingdom, appeared helpless and powerless.

However, Jesus did have some followers, some of whom he picked to be famous and powerful leaders in his kingdom. Ah, okay, so this is where we start finding some movers and shakers, some real rainmakers in the world, right? If today you were going to establish a kingdom that was going to impact the world, who would you pick as its founding leaders? A couple of years ago I read Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. It is about the question of what creates fads. What causes some things to sweep the country in popularity or to go viral? Among other factors Gladwell said there are three kinds of people that are key in that process. He calls them Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen. Connectors are those rare people who just seem to be great networkers. They seem to know everybody. I kind of think of Anna and Toby in our family because they seem to know most of the people in San Diego. Mavens are people with the ability to somehow find solutions to problems,

they are people others look to for wisdom. Salesmen are those charismatic, persuasive people who are able to convince others to buy what they are selling. If it were me I'd look for a couple of celebrities, athletes or entertainers to give the kingdom some visibility. That's not exactly what Jesus did. He chose as the core of this group some common fishermen from a lightly regarded region of the country. These were unknown, blue collar guys. One of his chosen few was from the bottom rung of society, a despised traitor to his own people. The rest of them were a ragtag collection of no-names. There were no names, no celebrities, no Connectors, no Mavens, no Salesmen. You would have to try hard to come up with a less promising group of leaders of your new kingdom. They were the definition of insignificance and powerlessness in the world. The whole enterprise was so insignificant no one in the entire Roman Empire took any notice of it.

The kingdom of God started with the inconsequential, the insignificant, the powerless, the unnoticed and unremarkable. It was small and unimpressive. Yet from those beginnings what happened? Within one generation that small seed had produced a movement that included hundreds of thousands of people. It had spread to the farthest reaches of the known world. And that movement has now continued for two millennia. At least nominally in that kingdom today are more than 2 billion people. Jesus has more followers than anyone else in human history. The kingdom of God has permeated the entire world. Do you think anyone in 30 A. D. could ever have envisioned what has happened with the kingdom of God?

#### THE KINGDOM CONTRASTS WITH WHAT PEOPLE EXPECT

It was not what people expected in the first century. The prophet, Daniel, had a vision of the coming of this kingdom. It is recorded in Daniel 7:13-14. "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

What picture does that prophecy evoke in your mind? It's pretty spectacular. It's all about power and glory. People who were living under the boot of an occupying power whom they detested loved that prophecy. They were certain the coming of the kingdom meant that the despised forces would be defeated and humiliated, bowing before the conqueror. It was going to be dramatic, powerful and glorious. That surely seems to be what the prophecy indicated.

Even today in America when a new regime is instituted how does it happen? Is it quiet, understated and humble? Far from it. Our culture and our form of government is radically different from that of first century Israel. But even in today's America when a President is inaugurated it is a huge affair. This year's scaled down inauguration was attended by an estimated 1 million people. Cost estimates for the one day event range from \$180 million to \$300 million! It was spectacular. When a new king takes over and a new kingdom is established it is always done with spectacle and flair. No one expected humble babies, common blue collar laborers and executions. Yet that is exactly how the Kingdom of God burst upon the world.

In Luke 13:33 after some people told Jesus to leave Judea because Herod wanted to kill him he said, "I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" In other words, he was telling them that soon he was going to die in Jerusalem. The people of Jesus' culture were anticipating the coming of the kingdom of God. But what they expected was a powerful conquering hero who would defeat their enemies. They likely interpreted the Daniel prophecy to be somewhat symbolic, but the message of a new ruler coming in the clouds of heaven surely depicted something awesome. Jesus was preparing his followers for the fact that it wasn't going to be like that. It was going to be as unspectacular as planting a tiny, humble mustard seed in the ground. The initiating event was going to be his death on that cross.

The way of the Kingdom of God is not what we typically expect in our culture today. I've already made the point that even in our culture when we install a president, even if he is merely returning to office, we make it a big event. It still has to be spectacular. There is a similar thing that happens among those who are religious. There is an obsession with big, impressive and splashy. We think if God is working it will be obvious. It will be glorious in human terms, meaning it will be eye-catching and big. God, we think, will always be dramatic because, after all, he is God. Creation was impressive wasn't it? It was spectacular when God parted the Red Sea. It was dramatic when Elijah faced down the prophets of Baal and God sent fire down to burn up the sacrifices Elijah had put out. On the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was sent into believers for the first time it was so noticeable and dramatic that more than 3000 people chose to follow Jesus that day.

So what do we conclude? If God is working, if the kingdom of God is showing up in a place, it will be obvious and dramatic. It will be big and spectacular. God is only at work when big things are happening. We are thrilled when some famous

person professes faith in Jesus. That's big! That's surely going to impress the world.

I have a personal opinion about that, and I want to make it clear that this is only my opinion, not the Word of God. My opinion is that we like that which appears big and spectacular because our faith is weak. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:7 "we live by faith, not by sight." And we say, "no we don't." We like to see it. We feel bolstered in our faith, we feel it is validated when our numbers are large. We like to see visible results. It's hard to live by faith in the truth that God is with us, that we are part of God's kingdom, when we are small in number, unimpressive, and we don't see a lot changing. We want evidence that God is at work. We want God to prove himself.

There's a familiar story in Acts 8:26-38 in which Philip, a leader in the early going of the church, was instructed by God to leave Samaria where he had been having a dynamic ministry leading many people to faith in Jesus. He was to head south on a desert road toward Gaza. On the way he encountered an Ethiopian official on his way home from Jerusalem. Philip heard him reading from Isaiah and took the opportunity to discuss it with the man, and as a result he led him to faith in Jesus Christ. That man was baptized then he went on his way and is never mentioned again in the Bible or in history. Was God at work when that one man came to faith in Jesus? The answer obviously is yes. In fact, Philip could have led many more people to Jesus where he was in Samaria, but God wanted him to go reach that one man. It was quiet, it wasn't spectacular, it wasn't big. But the Kingdom of God was at work.

God simply doesn't do things or see things the way we do. The message Jesus gives in this little parable is that his kingdom is very different than the kingdoms of this world. The kingdoms of our world are all about power, pomp, and impressiveness. God's kingdom is often at the other end of the spectrum. It is quiet, unspectacular, but powerful in its own way.

The message is that God typically works in this understated, quiet and humble way that nevertheless over time impacts the world. But wait, God has done many spectacular things throughout history. Remember the parting of the Red Sea and the manna in the wilderness. And how about Jesus feeding thousands of people with a tiny bit of food, calming storms, healing blind people and lepers and rising from the dead. Those were pretty spectacular. True, but consider the fact that God has unlimited power. How often throughout history has he miraculously displayed that power? Not often. The overwhelming majority of the time God has been at

work, but it has been understated to the point where at times it is nearly invisible. God's kingdom right now typically is humble, seemingly insignificant, but in its own quiet way turns out to be powerful and glorious.

### IMPLICATIONS

What should we take from this little picture?

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS UNIQUELY POWERFUL

The power of the kingdom is immense. It is a power that we cannot comprehend, but it is not powerful in the sense of being forceful and controlling. It is, in fact, a life giving power. Consider the power of the seed. It is a truly mystical power. A seed appears pretty much like a small piece of wood. Yet within that seed is a power we cannot comprehend. Somehow given the right conditions that seed does this astounding thing. It sprouts life! A growing plant springs out of it, a plant that can grow into a large shrub or even a tree.

For a number of years Laurie and I rented a house in Encinitas. One thing that was always a problem there was the yard. It did not have an operating irrigation system in front or back and it didn't have very good soil. So it was difficult to grow good grass there. We didn't have money to put into improving it, nor were we interested in spending money to improve a property that belonged to someone else who had no interest in improving it. But on a couple of occasions I made valiant attempts to plant and grow grass. I went into the back yard and threw tiny grass seeds throughout the yard. Then we covered the whole area with dirt and fertilizer. For the next couple of weeks we were diligent about watering the yard because I was told I needed to keep it damp. Day after day passed and all there was in the yard was wet soil and fertilizer. I kind of concluded that the whole thing was an epic fail because I just am not able to make anything grow. But then one morning I came out and was shocked to see little tiny shoots of grass sticking up all over the yard!

I was right about one thing. I can't make anything grow. But I remember looking in wonder at that yard. One day there was nothing back there but dirt and fertilizer covering a bunch of seeds that appeared to hold the promise of absolutely nothing. The next day when I looked out in the morning I saw life! There were little shoots of grass sticking up all over the yard. It was like a miracle right before my eyes. We study things like this, but we don't totally understand it, we don't control it, we depend on it and give thanks for it.

The kingdom of God is like that. In its own quiet, mystical, incomprehensible way, it is powerful. It has the power to bring life and to change all around it. Dr. Alvin Schmidt, professor of sociology at Illinois College, has written a book entitled

*Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Society.* In it he describes what has happened where the Kingdom of God has gone on this earth. In the ancient Greco-Roman world as well as in India, China, and Japan, there was low value placed on human life. As a result infanticide and child abandonment were both accepted and common. Deformed or frail children were killed. It was the Kingdom of God that came and brought value to individuals. That included all individuals. Our understanding of the value of a single human life exists because the kingdom of God created it. It brought about massive change.

Koritz Kaufman wrote along similar lines in his book, *Social Development Under Christian Influence*. Both writers point out that the Kingdom of God has radically changed the human condition for the better. It has been responsible for the elevation of the status of women. Under Roman law women and children were little more than slaves, often were treated like animals. They had few, if any, rights. Schmidt says, "The historical record shows that women were oppressed in almost every culture prior to the coming of Christianity...the Christian religion revolutionized the place and prestige of women." The Kingdom of God's arrival led to concern for the poor and the sick and was the impetus for education for all people. These and many other changes reflect the life-giving power of the Kingdom of God.

I think sometimes we forget what has happened to us who believe in Jesus. The kingdom of God has taken root in our souls. Colossians 1:12-13 says we should be "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." We have been rescued and brought into the kingdom where God rules. That kingdom exists in our hearts and lives. Here is where God rules, and where God rules what results is light. It is pure goodness. It is kindness. It is love and justice. It is forgiveness and grace. It is joy and passion. It is what life should be. The kingdom of God is what humans have always dreamed of. It is what we long for.

About 10 years ago after the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway* about a man stranded alone on an island in the Pacific came out FedEx ran a commercial during the Superbowl spoofing it. In the commercial a FedEx employee who looks like the Hanks character in the movie, bedraggled and unkempt from years being stranded, shows up at a suburban home with a package. He rings the doorbell and when a woman answers he explains that he had survived 5 years on a deserted island, but that he kept that package safe the whole time in order to deliver it. She says simply, "Thank you." Curious about the package he had safeguarded all those



years he says, “May I ask what’s in the package?” She opens and shows him saying, “Oh, nothing much really. Just a satellite telephone, global positioning device, water purifier and some seeds.” All those years he had in that package the power he needed for his situation. We are much like him.

The kingdom is in our hearts. In Luke 17:21 Jesus said the kingdom of God is within you. God has established a beachhead in your heart if you believe in Jesus. He has planted a seed in your heart. It is powerful, full of life. It will sprout. The yeast of his kingdom is in you, and it will influence your entire life. When we choose to live in and for God’s kingdom, what we experience is hope, joy, peace, love, purpose and fullness of life.

### THE KINGDOM WILL THRIVE

When you look at how the kingdom of God began in the days of Christ there was plenty of reason to think it hopeless. It was isolated to a small corner of the Roman Empire to begin with. Then it germinated among people of no influence at all and it seemed to come to a crashing halt when the King was hung up on a cross. Yet the kingdom survived all of that and exploded.

There are times today when Christians fret about the future of the kingdom. Frankly, you look at the way things are going in our society and the trends are not encouraging. Young people today seem less and less interested in the good news of Jesus and are increasingly missing in churches. This would not seem to bode well for the future of the Kingdom. You look at how our culture has become increasingly hostile toward the Kingdom of God in the past 20 years and it is stunning. That trend is not likely to change. In fact, it is accelerating. Here is what we need to remember: the Kingdom of God may appear powerless, even insignificant, but it is not going to be stopped. It will continue to thrive. Yeast will do what yeast does. The seed will sprout and grow.

It is easy to compare our little church to what the government can do and feel like we are so weak. We compare to Hollywood and our production values look pitiful. Multinational businesses have so much more money and resources. The kingdom appears insignificant and powerless compared to the world and its forces. But here is the truth: We are part of the kingdom of God, and that kingdom will not lose!

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the

strong; He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” That’s us he’s talking about. We are the foolish, the weak, the lowly, the despised, the things that are not. He chose us so that it will be obvious that his kingdom is not established by human ability, talent, wisdom, influence, money or power. It is established by God’s grace and power alone.

This is important for us to keep clear in our minds because when we don’t bad things typically happen. We start to try to look “successful” and impressive like the world does so we can impress them, and when we do that we completely miss the point. Or we might worry about the future of the kingdom and fear it is up to us to protect it. At that point we are tempted to start using power and force on those who might oppose us. This kind of thing has a long history, going back to the Crusades and beyond. Yes, there are enemies of the kingdom of God who will seek to destroy it. There always have been and always will be. But we don’t need to protect God’s kingdom from those people. They can no more stop the kingdom from fulfilling God’s plan for it than they can stop yeast from permeating dough.

When we forget about the power of the kingdom we start to think it is up to us to make it grow. That can have several negative effects. It can make us focus only on results. We start to look for people who can “make things happen” to be our leaders. We start glorifying them and then everything starts to get skewed. We start glorifying leaders and should not be surprised when they badly compromise. Or we might be so desperate for “results” and for the need to promote the kingdom that we start using guilt on people as a way of motivating them to work hard for the kingdom. We will do whatever we deem necessary to “make things happen.” Robert Capon wrote in his book, *The Parables Of The Kingdom*, “our tendency to think that our own moral efforts are necessary to the plan of salvation leads us to set up scenarios in which the work of the kingdom simply will not go forward without our cooperation.” All of these things are deadly. They can be avoided by remembering that though the kingdom may look weak, even impotent at times, it is always powerful. The seed will sprout and will fill the earth.

#### THE KINGDOM WILL GROW IN US

Do you ever get down on yourself? You hear sermons, read books, see examples of people who are amazing, strong, so committed, and you think you’re a pretty poor excuse for a follower of Jesus. You fail. You have all these weaknesses and inconsistencies and to be sure you do not exhibit the power that you think a believer in Jesus ought to have. I struggle with those thoughts. I feel like I ought to be way more powerful, way more consistent, way more holy, way more effective. I

don't see how I'm changing the world very much. Here's what you and I need to remember. God seems to delight in using the insignificant and powerless. He has planted a seed in us, and that seed will have its effect.

It may not look very impressive, but what God does is take these tiny seeds that are scattered all over the world and makes them into something amazing. I once heard a dynamic preacher who gave a call to his Christian audience to be "ordinary people doing extraordinary things." It was challenging, inspiring, and a little discouraging because I don't seem to do anything extraordinary and I doubt I ever will. Here's what I want to help you with. God calls ordinary people to do ordinary things and let him somehow use that in his plan. There's an old African proverb that says, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending a night in a closed room with a mosquito."

Have you ever done that? Laurie and I have. We were given a terrific wedding present by the parents of one of our friends. They gave us a week in a condo they owned on the island of Kauai. So for our honeymoon we went to Kauai. We loved it. Looking back on it I realize that condo wasn't the most amazing place. It wasn't near a really good beach and it didn't even have air conditioning. But we didn't care, it was terrific. However, the lack of air conditioning came into play. The last couple of days we stayed there it got very warm. In fact, they set records as the thermometer hit 92, rare for Hawaii. That meant we left windows and doors open to get the trade winds blowing through the condo. As a result somehow that last night we stayed there a mosquito got into the place. It was just one mosquito. When we tried to sleep that night it was a little difficult because it was pretty warm. But the biggest problem was that idiotic mosquito. It was just one tiny insect, but I would start to drift off then I'd hear the whine of that bug swooping in for an attack and I'd wave it off. This happened repeatedly for better than an hour. That thing made it impossible for us to sleep. We finally devised a plan. There was a sleeper sofa in the living room. We would dash into the living room together and slam the bedroom door shut trapping the mosquito in the room. That's what we did. That's the only way we were able to get any sleep that night.

So you're saying we should be annoying like that mosquito? No, that's not the point. What that incident tells us is that one little creature simply doing what it was designed to do can have impacts all out of proportion to its size and significance. And so can we. Simply by doing what God has put us here to do, serving him each day, doing the little things to express his love and grace to others, being thoughtful, being kind, forgiving when hurt or offended, we can impact other people. God can and will take our little efforts and use them like yeast in the dough or like that seed

in the ground. It's not about how powerful or extraordinary we are or how much we can do, it's about that tiny mustard seed. Let us trust in the power of God's kingdom and rejoice in its work in and through us.