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**Homily for the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
St. Anthony of Padua Church, Hot Springs**

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As we heard in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus uses parables to describe the kingdom of heaven. Why parables? What is a parable? For the ancient Jews, a parable was a cryptic saying or story intended to stimulate thought, using images from everyday life that people would understand. Jesus spoke in parables deliberately in order to break the mold of traditional thinking and presumptions people have. But also they are a means to reach the stubborn and hard-hearted to give them something they can grasp onto that perhaps will lead them to conversion – accepting the love and mercy Jesus offers us. That is conversion.

Jesus uses three parables today to describe the kingdom of heaven. So often when people think about the kingdom of heaven, where do their thoughts go? A place in the afterlife. But we know that if we look at the kingdom of heaven as merely the afterlife, then we greatly diminish the good news that Jesus brings us and its power to transform our lives and the world.

The kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is not far from us – it is in our midst. This is one of its features. It is close to us every day. But it is often hard to see. We become blind to it. For many people it doesn't seem to be a part of their everyday lived experience.

The idols of this world – success at all costs, power at the expense of the weak, the thirst for wealth, pleasure at any price – these things drown out or deeply veil the kingdom of heaven in our midst.

Suffering, the Cross, the crosses of everyday life – the cross of work, family, of carrying on doing good things – the daily crosses of life are part of the kingdom of heaven. The advent of the kingdom came on that Christmas morning and was fully realized in Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. But because we desire to reject suffering, we don't experience it as part of the kingdom. But it is.

God came to establish his dominion in our history, in Jesus, in our everyday life, and where it is accepted with faith and humility and love in its fullness, we will find true freedom and true happiness. Jesus didn't say, "I came so that you can manage your life." He said, "I came so that you may have life to the full – life in abundance." That fullness of life can be experienced even in the midst of suffering. That is part of the Good News. The kingdom of God is often times hidden, hidden in the holiness of daily life, every day holiness. Where Jesus is, we will find the kingdom.

Again, Jesus uses three parables today to describe the kingdom of heaven. Let's look at these a little closer at what they tell us.

These parables are filled with unmistakable truths – about man, about faith, about the kingdom, **but ultimately about God.**

The kingdom which Christ has come to proclaim and to offer us has these characteristics.

First of all, it is a life lived as God created it to be lived: **full of meaning, purpose and lasting happiness**, which comes only through a personal, intimate friendship with Jesus and obedience to him and his Church. Perhaps that is why Pope Francis, in the Joy of the Gospel, “*invites all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, and to do this unfailingly each day.*” This relationship, this encounter, is imperative to a life of fullness in the kingdom, and we can never stop begging for it.

The kingdom is experienced through knowing, loving and following him more each day, seeking his will for our lives. Christ’s kingdom will continue to grow, not only in us, but in our families, in our communities, little by little. If we are growing in love for God and our neighbor, then Christ’s kingdom is growing in us.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds portrays the reality of the world in Christ’s kingdom – in the kingdom which Christ has established there is great goodness and there is evil, side by side, even in the very Church that bears Jesus’ name. St. Matthew is writing in response to the reality during both Jesus’ public ministry and the ministry of Matthew’s community near the end of the first century. The parable doesn’t try to explain the mystery of evil. It shows it to be a matter of daily life.

In Christ’s kingdom there will always be opposition and contradiction. The weeds and the wheat grow up together, side by side. The attack on Christians around the world today regarding religious freedom is a perfect example of this. Wherever there are saints, there are sinners to make them suffer. Wherever Christ begins to change lives, scandal, mockery, persecution, temptation and division break out like fires. Why? Because the enemy of Christ, the devil, is hard at work in our fallen world, resisting the advance of Christ’s kingdom ... both within and outside the Church. Within and outside our government. Where there is power and greed, the evil one is very near.

Even within our own hearts, evil, sinful tendencies do not completely disappear as we grow in the Christian life. Sometimes we think that if we are following Christ everything should go smoothly. But that’s not what this parable teaches us. Nor is it what Christ’s kingdom is like – not even for the saints.

The kingdom is always growing. It started small when Christ established it – just a few disciples gathered in a room on the first Easter Sunday, filled with both faith and fear. Christ’s kingdom starts small and its impact will always be out of proportion to its size; Jesus likes small – like a mustard seed, like a little bit of yeast in a huge batch of flour – but it’s alive, and so it is always growing ... even in each of us. Those small seeds of faith, hope, love, mercy, compassion that were planted in our souls in Baptism, as they are nurtured and cared for through our life in the Church, they will grow into something far beyond what we can imagine.

**This parable of the mustard seed tells us that nature’s growth is not only imperceptible, but it is inevitable.** There is nothing so powerful as growth. Imagine a very tiny seed ... a seed the size of a freckle ... put under several inches of dirt. It doesn’t matter that the ground is a zillion times the weight of the seed. The seed will push it back and break through. One can never underestimate the power of a seed. We should never be daunted by small beginnings. Our scripture readings today, in many ways, express this. Nothing can stop growth. It is so with the kingdom. In spite of man’s rebellion and disobedience, God’s work goes on; and nothing in the end can stop the purposes of God. His kingdom will go on, with or without us **because he deeply cares about his creation. God feels responsible for us.**

The tiny seed of faith planted in your hearts at Baptism, surrounded and perhaps pressed down by the weight of worldly things over the many years of life, and struggles, and persecution, has somehow managed to break through this weighty world, to a place where each of us, in our own way, has discovered and experienced the kingdom of God ... a life of faith, hope and love ... some more deeper than others ... and a call to live more deeply in that kingdom ... a kingdom which bears and will continue to bear great fruit. We praise God for that.

If the mustard seed represents faith, then faith is power. Faith lifts us up out of the little narrow world in which we live and connects us to the power and mystery of God. When we are connected to God in a lived and active faith, we are connected to enormous power. This is what God's kingdom looks like. It is powerful for those who have surrendered themselves to it. Again, we do not create the kingdom of God; **the kingdom is God's**. But we can be rooted in it and in the values of the kingdom.

In Jesus Christ, the kingdom is that "mustard seed grown into the tree where the birds of the air come and dwell in the branches"; where we come to not only find rest, but power through faith. Our life in the kingdom today is not from our own doing, but is a result of God's profound and deep love for you and me. Again, he feels responsible for us. That may be hard for some to believe. It is he who has made that seed of faith grow. Our lives of faith, hope, trust, mercy, love must now be "the tree where others can come and dwell in the branches ...". This is letting the kingdom flow out from us.

A little bit of Christian courage can have effects that are far-reaching. One act of forgiveness and mercy can put an end to decades of bitterness, hatred and resentment. One young man saying yes to God's call to the priesthood can profoundly have an impact on the whole world – as it did with St. John Paul II.

A faithful mom and dad, a lawyer, a business person, a teacher and a faith-filled student who let Christ reign in their hearts and actions are spreading God's saving grace far and wide. One may never know the impact. This is how Christ's kingdom works. But we all have to do our part and we each have a specific role.

Just how far and wide the kingdom will spread will only be known at the end of the time, when everything is revealed. But the impact of daily saying yes to Jesus Christ can never be exaggerated.

We are all beneficiaries of that kingdom, through the grace that is growing in our hearts like a mustard seed, making us, little by little, more like Christ.

As we gather for this Eucharist today, Jesus wants us to renew our confidence in his kingdom – its power for growth, its ability to withstand the attacks of enemies, and its capacity to transform lives – our own, our families, and our communities.

Many earthly kingdoms and empires have come and gone. But Christ's kingdom remains and continues to grow and spread. Each day, you, I and many others pray to the Father in the Lord's own words: "Thy kingdom come." This prayer needs to mold and shape the mind and heart of every Christian, so that His kingdom will be realized more clearly. It must bear fruit in the way we live our lives and in the way we build up our families and communities.

As we receive Holy Communion today, let us ask Jesus to shape our minds and hearts with his grace, so that we can say those same words throughout this coming week, not only with our mouth, but with the example of our lives: Thy kingdom come!