

Parables of Great Price
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
July 27, 2008

Jesus told his disciples and the crowds gathered on the beach, a story, a parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of the shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He 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.”

Jesus dismissed the crowds and went into the house. His disciples came to him and he told them more stories,

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown in to the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets, but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“Have you understood all of this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe, every student, who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

And Jesus said to his disciples, *“Have you understood all of this?” And they answered,.... “Yes.”*

Well, how else, in the Name of God – literally – would you answer Jesus? Can you imagine raising your hand and saying to the Messiah, the Son of God, “Well, really, Rabbi, No. I don’t get it at all...maybe I wasn’t listening...could you go over that again?” Isn’t that how we feel though? Standing here with the disciples and that crowd two thousand or so years later?

I’d like to begin with some sermon ground rules this morning...If you are looking for complete answers, wisdom neatly wrapped in a pretty box that you can take home with you...I’ll just tell you now...you might as well pack it up and go home...you are going to be sorely disappointed.

Because there are no clean and neatly packaged answers that come with the parables. That’s not what stories do ...they don’t give pat answers...they give us images to feed our imaginations and our souls...exaggerated images, images in hyperbole, extra-vitamin rich images which are fuel

for creating the core values that we live by...and in living out these values we may discover and live into some answers to old questions...but mostly we live more deeply into new questions, don't we? Stories remind us that unless we become like children, willing to listen to God in the parables of Jesus, eager to listen with a willing suspension of disbelief, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven, God's realm.

So now that we all know what to expect this morning...now that we know that we are most likely to be standing with the disciples when this is all over, shaking our heads and saying..."Uh, sure, Rabbi, I get it...maybe...well, at least part of it...I think..." , now that we are all on that same muddy page, let's get started.

Jesus gives us six parables in our passage this morning. There could be innumerable sermons on each one! But the gospel writer has grouped these together to illuminate Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of heaven or the realm of God as we like to say these days of inclusive language. God's ways and wishes, hopes and dreams, the ways of righteousness for creation. I was recently asked by my son, Colin, "Mom, just explain to me this kingdom of heaven stuff...and don't use any church words...don't even say the word God!" "Okay..." , I thought, " Thanks a lot, God! This is a test, isn't it?" "Colin, the kingdom of heaven is the organic, unfolding of creation, of the universe that we are a part of and even co-creators in or with to create justice and love for all of creation." "Oh," he says, "You mean it's just that we are all One and part of the whole web of life? Well, why didn't you just say so?"

My description is just the tip of the iceberg in describing the notion of the kingdom of heaven. However, I believe that it does encompass God's cosmic community, of which the earthly community is a part. It is about following in God's ways of love and peace and compassion and justice as we realize that we are one on this planet and as we are constantly in the process of becoming one.

Jesus' first two parables in our passage this morning give us similar images of what the power potential of the kingdom of heaven, God's realm, is like...not what the church is like...but what God's realm wherever it is manifest is like and what our participation in it might be like. First, it is like a mustard seed...the smallest of all seeds. There are many kinds of mustard plants, some wild, some cultivated, some white, yellow, black. Technically they do not grow into a tree. They grow into a huge shrub, 8- 10 feet tall. However this is story language which uses exaggeration to get its point across. The image of a tree takes us to the image of the tree of life. It took Jesus' listeners to the image of the imperial tree, a symbol of empire. The glory of the kingdom will grow from something in Jesus' culture which was very ordinary, plentiful and tiny. A seed which incidentally must be sowed annually, needs to be planted each year. But once it is sowed, it grows rapidly into its incredible height and makes thick groundcover for nesting birds. I also learned in an internet search on Wikipedia..."There has been recent research into varieties of mustards that have a high oil content for use in the production of biodiesel, a renewable liquid fuel similar to diesel fuel." An interesting fact in light of our very current life situation.

Next the kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman hid in three measures of flour...now we think we know what this is about, don't we? This little story, little image may seem very obvious to us...not so ... New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine describes the difference between our experience of yeast and the yeast of Jesus' time, "Today, when congregations hear about "leaven" [or yeast], the image that comes to mind is not the work of a fungus that feeds off the dough in a dark, damp place, but rather a red packet that sits in the refrigerator door." In Jesus' time yeast was a fungus that corrupted, that fermented, not necessarily a desirable effect, often used as an image of corruption. So using it as an image of the kingdom of heaven was surprising to point of being scandalous. God works in mysterious ways. And what of those three measures of flour...this woman was not just making bread for her family... not three cups...three measures was more like

10 gallons of flour...this is enough leavened bread to feed 100-150 people! And what of that little word, "hid"? Once again the kingdom of heaven is something very small and its hidden, working in the dark and in silence through scandalous and surprising means, it has huge power potential. It creates exponentially and extravagantly!

The kingdom of heaven is like small, ordinary, everyday, even corrupting – at least to the status quo – surprising, tiny things with huge hidden power potential for extravagant creativity! That's the kind of power we participate in when we participate in the kingdom of God! Do you understand all of this? So-so...sort of! See if this helps...One commentator wrote..."The kingdom of heaven is like a lay preacher, just an ordinary person, not someone educated in the one of the finest divinity schools in the land, an ordinary person who loved God and answered God's call to preach every Sunday to a congregation of twenty-five people in a city of two million residents. The preacher kept on preaching until the whole city believed the good news of God's love." Mustard seeds, yeast, ordinary people answering God's call to proclaim! That is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

And then the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God is like a treasure hidden in a field and found unexpectedly by someone, a farm laborer, perhaps, working in that field on a regular old work day. Or the someone could have been just another ordinary person walking through the field, could have even been a trespasser. But whoever ... the treasure that is found is so fine, the person hides it again! And the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, someone who makes a living searching for fine jewels, pearls in particular for they were the diamonds of Jesus' time, a merchant who finds a pearl of great price and value after a long and diligent search. And here's the kicker, did you notice in each of these parables that when each hidden delight is found, the finder sells ALL he or she has to buy the treasure of their heart's desire! There is urgency here. Each person goes immediately and

sells all to get the purchase price for their treasure...TOTAL commitment is required to achieve the desired prize. Total commitment freely and joyfully given!

We might sell something to buy something of great value...but all we have? Is this the cost of discipleship with Jesus...the cost of our baptism, the vows we made, the vows made for us by parents...that we be willing to commit ALL of our self, body, mind, heart and soul, all of our life to be a part of the hidden and surprising power potential of God's work in the world – not necessarily the institutional church's work in the world – but total commitment to God's work wherever we find ourselves in the midst of it? And this TOTAL commitment will be our greatest Joy? Do you understand all of this? So-so...sort of...yeah, me too!

Finally, the kingdom of heaven is like a huge dragnet...six feet deep...several hundred feet wide that takes several fishermen to drag in...it brings in everything...the good fish and the rotten ones...and then it is all sorted out with that exaggerated end times imagery of separating the evil from the righteous and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. So what is up with this, Jesus? Will there really be a judgment like that? Are you saying, we better accept this Total Commitment thing or else we are out on our ears – or gills as the metaphor would have it? This is so extreme for our 21st century sensibilities...Come on, Jesus, what's up with the judgment thing, this sorting out thing...unless it's already happening in our own hearts?

Granted in the cosmology of Jesus' there were definitely end times implications in this story...but now two thousand years later when the end times have not come as expected...yet when our times are definitely not looking so good...Could this picture of sorting the good from the not-so-good be a picture of sorting out our own lives, our own inner kingdoms of the heart – or to stay with the metaphor – the dragnets of our souls? Do we need this sorting out as we seek to participate in the power potential of the realm of God here and now in our precarious times? As we seek total commitment to being ordinary mustard seeds and ordinary yeast?

But wait...the mustard seeds and the yeast they are pictures of the kingdom of heaven, right...not of me or you? Not of us? I can hear you saying...I thought I was beginning to understand...now you are confusing me!

Our stories today are from the gospel of Matthew...but they cannot help but resonate with what Jesus says in the gospel of Luke and in the gospel of Thomas...the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God is among YOU, is hidden within YOU! Bring it forth; let the yeast of God's power rise within you; plant the mustard seed of faith over and over again in your heart, so it may grow into a huge, sheltering, life-giving tree of love and compassion in the barren places of this world. Be willing to sell all – to let go of everything – to be urgently and totally committed to gaining the treasure of your life in God, body, mind, heart and soul! For in the kingdom of heaven, in the realm of God where we are ultimately one, connected with the smallest amoeba of creation and the farthest, greatest star, our total commitment requires us to sort out our lives, to throw out the decaying answers, questions, and values that weigh us and all of creation down, that keep the yeast from rising and the seeds from taking root.

“Have you understood all of this?” They answered, “Yes.” And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe, every student, every disciple who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

May the new answers, the new questions heard in the parables of Jesus this day be as treasure in your lives. May your new questions and your new answers interpret your old ones as we journey together in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.