

Genesis 29:15-28  
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b  
Romans 8:26-39  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Proper 12A  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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We've come to the parable extravaganza in this Sunday's readings, and that extravaganza starts with a tiny mustard seed. Jesus had already told the stories of the good sower sowing seeds with abandon and the evil one sowing weeds alongside the wheat, and he'd even explained the parable of the sower to the disciples. But it seems he'd just gotten started, as we hear parable after parable after parable after parable after parable. The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure, like a pearl, like a net teeming with fish of every kind. If somebody asked you, how would you describe the kingdom of Heaven? Or your experience of God's presence in your life? Or the mystery of the Eucharist?

These are things we may not have explanations for. Oh, we can talk around them, and we do. We try to find the right words, but the truth is, we don't really know exactly what those words are. And besides, such important things likely take on different meanings for different people. It's because these are not things we can know, only things we experience. And when we experience them, they have a profound impact on our lives... an impact we can't necessarily put into words. "It's like this" we say, "or like that."

Jesus says, it's like a mustard seed or yeast or a treasure or a pearl or a net teeming with fish of every kind. Some things can't be explained with words, they can only be known in our experience. Jesus knew that. It's why he used the experiences of people's lives to show them – not tell them - but to show them God's presence and action in their lives. The farmers understood what it was like to have weeds among their wheat. They knew what it was to try to farm rocky soil or have birds eat all their seeds. And because Jesus wanted all of us to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, today we hear of women baking bread, of merchants buying and selling, of treasure hunters and fisher people too.

The act of putting all these parables together is also what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a little church filled with people of all kinds who know God through the experiences of their own very different lives. That's how Jesus teaches. He speaks to us of the experiences of our own lives, helping us to see and to hear with the eyes and the ears of our hearts. And in doing that – in using the ordinary things of our lives to tell the marvelous stories of God's unspeakable generosity and boundless love - he shows us how our lives – how all lives - are holy. He shows us how "the experiences of our lives, when we let God use them, become the mysterious and perfect preparation for the work God gives us to do."<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds that will indeed grow into something very big. But Jesus compares the Kingdom to the thing that's been sown, the seed,

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<sup>1</sup> ten Boom, Corrie; [The Hiding Place](#); Bantam Books, 1984

not the giant shrub. The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny seed hidden deep in the ground, something we might not even know is there until it grows into the most marvelous, unimaginable and fruitful tree, attracting birds of every kind. But wait! Who wants mustard trees growing in their fields? Mustard spreads secretly underground like blackberries or bind weed, those invasive plants that ultimately take everything over. And it doesn't make sense that farmers would want to attract birds – just two Sundays ago, birds were eating up the seeds the sower sowed. Don't farmers put up scarecrows to scare birds away? But still Jesus says, the kingdom of Heaven is like a tiny, unwelcome weed seed – a seed that in last Sunday's parable was sown by the enemy, a seed that grows to great size, attracting even more unwelcome guests. But unwelcome guests are the ones Jesus hung out with, remember? Tax collectors and sinners and all manner of people who might not be first on our invitation list. Subversive, don't you think?

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. Just a bit of yeast in three measures of flour leavens the whole – all of it – so much that it's enough bread to feed hundreds of people. But a single woman preparing bread for hundreds doesn't really make sense. Why would she mix enough yeast into flour enough to make bread for hundreds of people? Because if the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that leavens all the flour and turning it into bread for the masses, then the Kingdom is a place of radical hospitality, profound inclusion and unspeakable generosity. That was utterly unlike the Roman kingdom that occupied first century Palestine, utterly unlike our world today. And yes, that's subversive too.

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. A hidden treasure and a hidden pearl to remind us that the Kingdom is present whether or not we recognize it, that sometimes we have to go searching for it, and sometimes we just happen upon it. But whether we search for or happen upon our treasure, we need the eyes of our hearts to recognize that one precious thing that is worth trading everything we have for, the thing that will bring unspeakable joy. Of course it doesn't make "sense" that a person would sell everything to buy a field with buried treasure or a single pearl, no matter what its value. But that's just it. The kingdom of heaven doesn't make sense in our world. And we've become so accustomed to our world that it's easy to think it's the Kingdom of Heaven that doesn't make sense. Did I say subversive?

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into 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. Now I know it's tempting to leap to the judgment we think we hear here, but let's not start with that. We are not the ones to do the sorting and judging isn't what we need to concern ourselves with. Jesus didn't say the Kingdom of Heaven is the place where the bad people burn in hell. He said it's like a net. A net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of

every kind. It's the net we're to pay attention to, because the Kingdom of Heaven is where everything, absolutely everything gets scooped up and welcomed in.

Have you understood all this?

Unlike the disciples, I don't think I could answer "yes." While it's true Jesus uses the ordinary things of our lives to help us see the Kingdom of Heaven, all these parables speak to me of a Kingdom that is unexpected, unpredictable, counter-cultural, subversive. A kingdom that is always at hand, found in the ordinary places of our lives and yet somehow something we must diligently search and work for. A kingdom whose hiddenness speaks of the mystery of God and the treasure that is worth our whole lives. Our whole lives! The kingdom of heaven is God's dream of justice, dignity, peace and love for all people, and that's what Jesus says is worth giving our lives for.

I would guess that every one of us in this room would say we want the world to be different, that we want dignity and justice for all people. The problem is, we actually have to change – perhaps significantly - in order for that to happen. While the mustard seed and the yeast show us the nature of God, this is what the pearl and the treasure are about. If we say we want God's kingdom to come – and we do say that every time we say the Lord's prayer – if we say we want God's kingdom to come but are unwilling to make the sacrifices that are needed for that to happen – well – how do we suppose it will happen? The people in the parables gave up everything they had. Everything. What are we very privileged people willing to give up? Are we willing to give up our self-righteousness, our certainty that our way is the right way so that we can love all our neighbors? Are we willing to give up our materially focused lives in order for all people in our community to have food security and a place to live? Are we willing to give up the convenience of zip locks in order to help our suffering planet? These are kingdom building and kingdom destroying questions, my dears. They are hard questions. And they ARE the questions Jesus puts in front of us today. I think he would like us to answer them.

Have you understood all this? Nope. I would not say I understand all that. But I do believe it. And that actually feels more important to me. You see, in parables, Jesus doesn't give straight up answers and he doesn't give us a lot of facts. He calls on our imaginations and experiences and invites us to find our answers ourselves. It's the way Jesus draws us in, telling us the stories of our place in God's Kingdom through an ordinary woman baking bread, ordinary fishermen catching fish, even ordinary schemers cheating people out of treasure. And somehow, he sanctifies it all, showing us the holiness of our own lives.

Jesus' parables invite us into a deeper faith that is grounded in our experiences of God, our experiences of love, our experiences of trust. Parables invite us to deepen our faith not by knowing more about God, but by coming to know God. Parables invite us deeper into God's story by inviting us deeper into our own stories and into our relationships with God. You see, God has planted the seeds of heaven in each one of our hearts. Sometimes they feel hidden, and sometimes they grow so quickly it takes our breath away.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed, like yeast, like a treasure, like a pearl, like a net teeming with fish of every kind, like a seed planted in your very own heart, which when nourished and nurtured becomes the treasure worth giving your whole life for. Amen.