

Proper 12 A

What an array of parables we have in Matthew's Gospel today!

The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven.

The hidden treasure and the pearl of great price.

The sorting of the fish with some being thrown away and others kept!

Every one of them is a puzzle – and each one of these puzzles will probably take an entire sermon to unravel. So, get up and go out to the kitchen and get your snacks and your drinks, and don't forget to bring some pillows to sit on because those pews are pretty hard. I guess were going to be here for a while this morning.

Or maybe not... When you stand back and look at all of these parables taken as a bunch, you start to see something striking:

You hear: "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

This phrase is repeated at the front of each of these stories.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus keeps resorting to parables?

Jesus keeps running up against the limits of language. When he tries to describe the kingdom directly, words just don't seem to work. He has to use stories instead – and not just one story, but a bunch of stories – to try and convey what the kingdom is like.

If we look closely, we are actually very familiar with this problem ourselves. Here, let me illustrate:

I'd like you to remember back to a time when you fell in love.

I want you to remember the first time you realized, "Oh my God! I think I'm falling in love."

I want you to remember what it felt like when your heart just...opened.

All of the feelings that came welling up.

The kind of unsteadiness you felt...

Like an invisible earthquake had just shaken the entire universe...

What words could possibly describe your experience?
Or how about that fabulous sunset you saw last week?
Or the music that seemed to spirit you away last night?

Our language is very good when we describe objects. We can describe the height, the width. The colors that we see. The textures as our hands run along the object.

But there are realities that words cannot describe.
The Kingdom of Heaven is one of those.

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Here's the problem: there is a hidden cost when we use language.
Language separates us. It divides the world into subjects and objects. Into 'this's' and 'that's'
By doing this, we begin to control the world around us. We can manipulate objects. It's easy. We do it all the time.

We even turn each other into objects to manipulate. But at some deep level, we recognize the wrongness of this.

When I turn you into an object – just another person in the pew – I have missed everything that is important about you. When you turn me into an object – just another preacher spewing words – you have failed to hear or to see me.

There is a deeper reality that words cannot touch. It is this reality that Jesus is trying to communicate to his listeners 2000 years ago and to us today.

So, let's turn and look at these parables and try to figure out, from the clues our Lord is giving us, just what is the reality his words are pointing toward.

First, notice that these parables are paired; they are given two at a time. In the first set, we see a male-coded image (a man tilling a field) with a female-coded image (a woman baking bread.) Why would Jesus go to this trouble?

He seems to be saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is neither male nor female but is somehow found in the tension between these two.

As we focus on the mustard seed image, you need to understand that for a first century Judean audience, the mustard seed image is a joke!

Jesus's listeners know that mustard is a garden herb, not a majestic tree like the Cedars of Lebanon. There are no birds of the air that nest in its branches and all of his listeners would know that, so what was he trying to say?

Jesus's listeners would catch the reference to majestic trees and know that he was speaking of the great Cedars, which do in fact shelter the birds. He is saying, in effect, that you expect something big and magnificent but the Kingdom is not like that.

Here Jesus is deliberately deflating the messianic expectations of his listeners – that the Messiah would come with a cosmic Army, defeat the Romans, and establish Israel as a great kingdom again.

Instead, Jesus says the Kingdom starts small and is insignificant in the beginning.

And what about the woman adding leaven to the flour? This is a much more subversive image than modern ears catch. In Jewish symbolism, leaven is almost always negative. It is a metaphor for corruption or moral contamination – “beware the leaven of the Pharisees.”

Also look at the scale of this image. A measure is roughly 50 pounds, so the three measures of flour used in this image would be enough to feed well over 100 people.

So here Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is both hidden and slightly disreputable. And all of this is perfectly consonant with the people Jesus hangs out with: tax collectors, prostitutes and other no-good, very-bad people.

Taken together these two parables indicate that the kingdom is so tiny – like a seed or a bit of yeast – that it is virtually invisible. But that seed and that yeast have the potential to grow... And the potential to feed multitudes. Multitudes that have extended over 2000 years; multitudes that are you and I and the Christians of this world today.

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Let's switch gears now and look at the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. Again, we have a pair, and this time the parables focus on class distinctions – the elite class and the worker class.

First is the laborer, working in someone else's field, uncovering a treasure. According to the laws of that period, the treasure belonged to the field's owner. To obtain the treasure, the laborer sells everything he has in order to buy the field.

The other story involves a merchant, one of the elite class. This merchant is deliberately searching for fine pearls and the story suggests that he is a person of some means and expertise.

When you compare these parables together, you see that one finds the kingdom by accident and the other by a lifetime of seeking. Matthew has them both respond in the same way: they sell everything they have, without any hesitation at all, so that they can legally claim their respective treasures

One finds the Kingdom by accident. One finds it by searching. The results are identical, so the method for finding is completely beside the point. The message is clear: *finding is everything!*

So what do these four parables teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven?

First, the kingdom is not coming the way that we expect. At the beginning – like with the yeast and the mustard seed – the Kingdom is virtually invisible. It is so small that it seems insignificant. It's true nature is hidden from us.

That said, in its mature form, the Kingdom of Heaven is magnificent. Priceless. But its value is totally different from what the world values.

It's not a great army, trampling down the unbelievers.
It is gentle, and humble of heart.

It's not mansions and bank accounts measured in the gazillions.

It is a way of life that is centered around love. Loving all people with no distinctions of money, or class...
or color of skin... or way of life.

It is a way of experiencing ourselves, each other, and all of Creation in a way that transforms us.

It is a kind of waking up to that which is beyond all words.

It is the awareness which comes before words are formed. It involves learning to see what is really there. It is being in connection with All-That-Is.

And the name we give that connection is love.

