

Kingdom of Heaven Metaphors
a message based on Matthew 13-31-33,44-52
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In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says, "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 shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is a wild growing weed sprouted from a tiny seed that takes over everything and provides a home for others.

To put it in Pacific Northwest terms, the kingdom of heaven is like Scotch broom, those innocuous little stems with their golden flowers, that grow into woody stalked bushes as tall as a person, crowding so densely in areas of soil disturbance they form an almost impenetrable forest. The kingdom of heaven jumps garden beds and borders and grows where it will...

The kingdom of heaven isn't a rare hothouse flower. It's not an exotic orchid in the hands of a collector or a thief, available only to those who are rich and powerful, those whose life is going perfectly, growing like a perfectly manicured garden.

My life, if a garden, is pretty weedy. Despite my attempts at order and control, the soil has been disturbed—and I can bet yours has, too.

Strange as it might seem, that's good news for us. There often isn't room for God when we insist on perfection and refuse to allow life to interfere with our plans and goals. But disturbance happens, whether we choose a positive change like marriage or a move, or we're struck by something more difficult like illness, divorce, or job loss. When the carefully manicured plot of our lives is disturbed, there's a space for the tiny seeds of God's kingdom to be planted, and once those seeds take hold, they're humanly impossible to eradicate.

So many of us are sticking close to home in these months of dis-ease, fear, and worry. The news of the kingdom of humans is filled with power struggles,

poverty, inequality, and injustice. And yet, there's more to the story; there's God's story of abundance, and hope, as God runs rampant like the unstoppable Scotch broom, which we futilely attempt to rein in, knowing eradication is impossible.

Jesus 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."

The Passover was commemorated with unleavened bread, a reminder of when the Israelites fled from Egypt before their bread could rise. Unleavened bread was holy and kept in the temple. It's still holy, and you can find unleavened bread here in our church, on the back wall in the ambry. All this unleavened bread is set apart for religious observances, for ceremonial purposes, but not for everyday consumption.

Leavened bread was everyday bread. Ordinary bread. And back then no one was buying a package of Fleischman's yeast and making a single loaf of bread out of pristine unmixed ingredients. The process was more like making sourdough from a starter, a mix of flour, water, and a little sugar that you set in a crock until it bubbles, froths, and rises as bacteria begin the process of fermentation. The baker would pinch some starter off to mix into flour and a bit of water until the leaven was thoroughly distributed. She'd also need to replenish the starter once or twice a day. Once leaven is in a bread, you can't pull it out, and starters, well-tended can live for generations.

As delicious as leavened bread is, this parable would've been insulting:

The kingdom of heaven is like rot and decay infecting and infiltrating its host!
What?

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast and flour kneaded by a woman—Did we read that right? A female image of God? A far cry from privilege and power, a woman can't even approach anything holy in the temple or church. It would've made the devout seethe to hear that the kingdom of heaven is like a person who is property, who has no rights, who is unclean on a regular basis, who is subject to the whims and control of others.

And this woman would've had incredible arm muscles, because she kneaded her yeast into about 60 pounds of flour! Enough to feed an army, or a town. Once again, the kingdom of heaven arrives in unexpected form and abundance.

Jesus continues with the metaphors:

“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.”

Is it possible that we are the treasure hidden in the field? That you and I are the pearl, that God will give anything to be with us? How dare Jesus say such a thing to the religious authorities who followed the letter of the law, who devoted themselves to study and purity. How sacrilegious that God would see each one of us as treasures, despite our faults and flaws, our splintered spirits, our fear and powerlessness, our inability to live as beloved, and our failure to love others as God would have us do.

What to make of the final images in today’s reading?

“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. 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.”

What happened to the good news of weeds, leaven, and treasure? What do we make of the dichotomy between mercy and justice, grace and judgment? How do we live in a “both/and” way? If I think of God as a parent, then I recognize that we’re loved unconditionally AND held accountable. I’m sure there’s much more depth to these words than I can grasp.

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks.

They answered, “Yes.”

They said “Yes”? Really?

I want to say that wouldn’t have been my answer...But maybe that’s not quite right.

Maybe I'd say "yes" while thinking, "no," because who wants to be the one to admit they don't get it, singled out in front of the class? The one to ask for things to be explained again. The one who needs extra tutoring after the lessons?

And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe 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 here we are, thanks to the scribes. We read from this treasure, week after week. Bringing new meaning out of ancient words, navigating our way through parables with our modern day views as we glimpse a pre-modern world. So much has changed in our societies and cultures since the days when Jesus spoke these words, and so much has changed since these words became sacred text.

But the words speak to us of timeless truths, even if we don't fully understand their meaning the first time or the hundredth.

Weeds and yeast. Pearls and nets.

May God dwell in our hearts and illuminate our understanding of the kingdom.