

Proper 12 A  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52  
July 30, 2023

*A Seed, A Weed, & A Pearl*  
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*[Jesus] put before them another 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 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. 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; <sup>46</sup>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 into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?' [he asked.] They answered, 'Yes.' <sup>52</sup>And he 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.'*

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Once again, this week, we hear Jesus going on about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Realm of God. This shouldn't really surprise us though. As I've shared last two weeks, the Kingdom of Heaven or the realm of

God was more than Jesus' favorite subject. In truth, it was his only subject. His preaching proclaimed it, his teaching explained it, and his healings and miracles illustrated it. For Jesus, this realm wasn't a place we go after we die, it was his dream of life on earth, here and now. Each of his parables on the subject was intended to challenge his hearers into seeing and experiencing the inbreaking of heaven's realm into their daily lived reality. Once they'd seen and experienced it for themselves, those same hearers were meant to midwife the realm into being for all people in all places at all times. Jesus' audiences seem to have been a bit confused about where to look for the kingdom, though.

Since you've already heard five parables, I'll add a sixth; this one about the 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic mystic, Nasrudin Hodja. Nasrudin was seen searching on the ground for something. "What have you lost, Mulla?" someone asked. "My key," said the Mulla. So they both went down on their knees and looked for it. After a time the other asked: "Where exactly did you drop it?" "In my own house," Nasrudin replied. "Then why are you looking here?" the other asked. "There is more light here than inside my own house," came the laughable response.<sup>1</sup> This little tale has morphed over the years and is more commonly known as a story about an inebriated man looking for his keys under a street light. It's used to illustrate a type of observational bias known simply as the Streetlight Effect. The Streetlight Effect is the tendency to look for answers in the easiest places.

Jesus seems to be using parables to counter the Streetlight Effect in his people's search for the Kingdom of God. In our dense little passage today from Matthew's gospel, Jesus provides not one, not two, not three, not even four, but five metaphors for the kingdom. Rather than pointing his hearers to the "obvious" places where one might expect to see the realm of heaven being born in their midst—places like the synagogue, the government, the scriptures, religious rites or religious professionals, Jesus urges people to think outside the box. "The kingdom of heaven," he says,

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<sup>1</sup> Yohan J. John. "The Streetlight Effect: A Metaphor for Ignorance and Knowledge," 3quarksdaily.com, March 21, 2016: <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2016/03/the-streetlight-effect-a-metaphor-for-knowledge-and-ignorance.html>.

“is like a mustard seed...like yeast...like a hidden treasure...like a merchant of fine pearls...like a net.” If you want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like and where to find it, look there. Let’s do just that and take a closer look at each of these metaphors.

First, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. We know that mustard seeds are tiny and they grow into a big ugly shrub, but it’s not the size here that matters. In Jesus’ day, this plant was a weed. It would be like comparing the kingdom to dandelion fluff that blows hither and yon infecting all the lushest of green lawns with plague of yellow flowers. It’s stealthy. It starts small. It blows where it will. And it sprouts, blooms, and spreads like a weed. And so it is with the kingdom.

Second, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. In Jesus’ day, woman’s work was considered of little value. Comparing the kingdom of God with a woman’s work of making bread was scandalous. Further, yeast was seen as mostly necessary, but ritually impure. It penetrated the flower, combined with the water and oil, and infected the whole dough. Once again, it’s stealthy and small, but when kneaded into the dough, the yeast transforms the bread from dense and flat, to light, and fluffy, and delicious. And so it is with the kingdom.

Third, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like hidden treasure. This wasn’t just any hidden treasure. This was treasure found in someone else’s field, re-hidden, and then bought for the price of the field. This treasure is a steal. It’s there all along, but only the buyer knows it and the seller is oblivious. The kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus, is like the joy of getting a hidden treasure for the price of a field. Once again, it’s stealthy. It’s small. It’s not visible to the naked eye, but it’s certainly there. And so it is with the kingdom.

Fourth, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant of fine pearls who sells all that he has to buy the most perfect of pearls. Unlike the hidden treasure gotten for the price of the field, this pearl comes at a high price—everything the merchant owns. And so it is with the kingdom.

Fifth and finally, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a net that catches fish of every kind. It's inclusive. It's all-encompassing. It catches you up even if you're just swimming along eating bugs. And so it is with the kingdom.

Is anyone else noticing a pattern here? The kingdom of heaven is represented in these parables by small, stealthy, even hidden things. It's value is unmistakable, but it's likely to be overlooked until it's caught you up like a fish in a net!

The truth is, other kingdoms are much more visible to the naked eye than this one is—this realm of heaven. We see the realms of earth, the leaders of these realms, the epic failings of nations battling poverty, or climate change, or racism, or economic injustice and we throw our hands up and resign ourselves to the status quo. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that folks just don't feel like they can do anything that matters in light of all that seems broken in our world. And to that, Jesus says, "Mustard seed! Yeast! Hidden treasure! Fine pearl! Fish net!" He invites his hearers to look deeper than the failures of earth's empires and their emperors and see that heaven's realm is being born, even now, in our midst. He reminds us to look for it, not in the easiest places, but in small, stealthy, even hidden things and to participate in its birth—to join in making it a reality for all people in all places at all times.

The greatest tragedy, I think, is when good people, faithful people, throw their hands up in exasperation, convinced that they are too small to be part of the solution to earth's many woes. That is an insidious lie. Jesus reminds us to look at the small, stealthy, even hidden things, to see the realm of heaven pushing through, and to join in bringing it to birth in our world.

What does that mean for us? I think it means that rather than being overwhelmed by all the huge problems in our nation and in our world, we open our eyes and start looking for the places where hope is pushing through the cracks of despair, where beauty is blossoming in a tiny fissure

in the concrete of cruelty, where goodness dribbles down a crevice of indifference. I think it means that we look for possibility and work to make it reality.

So, where do we see these sprouts of hope, blossoms of tenacious beauty, and dribbles of goodness amidst the despair, cruelty, and indifference that seems to characterize our world today? Where are we to find glimpses of the inbreaking of heaven's realm into our time and space for all people in all places at all times?

Jesus says, consider the mustard seed. It's stealthy and it starts small, but it spreads like a weed. Jesus says, consider the yeast. It's stealthy and small, but it transforms everything it touches. Jesus says, consider the hidden treasure. It's there, even when the naked eye can't see it. Jesus says, consider the pearl. It's costly, but it's worth it. Jesus says, consider the net. It's inclusive. It's all-encompassing. And eventually, it will catch you up in it. Where are we to find glimpses of the inbreaking of heaven's realm into our time and space for all people in all places at all times? Jesus says to look where we least expect it. Look for it and when we find it, join the stealthy and small, spreading and transforming, hidden and costly, inclusive and all-encompassing work of bringing the kingdom to birth in our world—for all people in all places at all times. May it be so. Amen.