

A Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020
The Rev. Robin Teasley

Jesus put before the crowds 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; 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; 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 this?” They answered, “Yes.” 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.” Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

The kingdom of heaven is like a disciple who wakes up in the morning to check the major news channels and sees five different explanations of the same event. As he sips his coffee, he tries to find the truth.

They are all such different accounts that only one could possibly be true, right? We believe we must choose one of them. And more than likely, we will choose the one source we usually choose every other day, clinging to that truth and unable to listen to any other truth. News sources bombard us daily and there's a lot of information to process. In these challenging times all this information can be exhausting, it can make us anxious and edgy, and it can even interfere with our relationships if we let it. Suddenly, we are searching for the kingdom of heaven and it is nowhere to be found.

Jesus has spent the whole of chapter 13 in Matthew's Gospel sharing the good news, the truth of the kingdom, with his disciples, indeed with anyone who has ears to listen. This morning we hear him rattling off five mini parables in a row without a commercial break. Slow down, Jesus, we have not finished our first cup of coffee yet! He asks the disciples if they understand all this. They quickly say yes, but we need to remember that these are the same disciples who never quite seem to understand Jesus on so many other occasions. Perhaps that's why Jesus told so many parables.

Jesus explains the kingdom of heaven, by telling the disciples that it's like a mustard seed or like yeast, it's like a treasure hidden in a field or like a priceless pearl, it's like a net that catches all kinds of fish. Well which is it? Surely all those descriptions cannot be true?

The mustard seed and the yeast describe a kingdom that starts very small and grows exponentially large. Both mustard and leavening would have had some negative associations in the minds of Jesus' disciples. Mustard is actually an invasive shrub and not really a tree at all, and in Jewish understanding the yeast, or leavening, was a symbol for corruption or impurity. It was what you had to eliminate from your home before celebrating Passover.

Even so, notice how Jesus uses mustard and yeast as examples of the way the kingdom of heaven works. A tiny seed grows uncontrollably, it cannot be contained, it's invasive and abundant. Once a mustard plant takes hold, it spreads everywhere. And as the yeast expands, it more than doubles the size of the dough. Three measures of flour mixed with yeast would make enough bread for more than one hundred people. Perhaps Jesus wants us to see that what we might at first believe to be wrong or undesirable might just have a greater purpose, a hidden truth.

The next two parables focus on a different part of the truth about the kingdom of heaven. They describe its value, and again Jesus surprises us with his examples. He talks about someone finding a treasure in a field, burying it again and going to sell all he has, in order to buy the field, noting the joy that comes in discovering an unexpected treasure, and then realizing that it's worth more than everything else that you own. Then Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like the merchant who was searching for good pearls, and when he came across the one pearl of greatest value, he sold everything he had to purchase that pearl. Sometimes the most valuable parts of the truth are hidden from us for a time. We might find it hard to understand giving up all that we have for the one thing of most value, but Jesus says that is what the kingdom is like.

In the fifth parable Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. This is different from the other parables in that it's a judgment parable and we are not all that comfortable talking about God's judgment. We can get defensive when we feel judged, or we can hurt others with our judgments. We forget sometimes that judging is God's job, not ours.

So what do we know about the truth of the kingdom of heaven from these five very different explanations? Is one more true than another? Can all five of them be a part of the truth of the kingdom of heaven? Perhaps Jesus would have us listen and hear that the truth of the kingdom is abundant and valuable and worth all that we have; that sometimes it is not what we expected, and sometimes it is hidden from us and we must search for it. There are times when the good news of the kingdom challenges us and times when it comforts us.

Jesus asks us, just as he asked his first disciples, "Do you understand this?" Do you have ears to hear and a heart that is open to understanding what you hear? These parables invite us to abandon our own explanation of the truth, and instead focus entirely on the many ways God is revealing God's truth in the kingdom that is already here, already active. Are we paying attention, and letting this kingdom of heaven, which is already and not yet, change us? Are we willing to be transformed as we listen to all of the truths God is speaking?

The kingdom of heaven is like a disciple who wakes up in the morning to check the major news channels and sees five different explanations of the same event. As she sips her coffee, she listens carefully to all the explanations.

What if we, as disciples of Jesus listen more attentively for the voice of Truth? What we would normally hear as wrong or negative, we might examine more closely because it might contain a seed of truth, have potential for great growth, and lead to abundance. And what if we also listen for joy and worth and unexpected treasures, which we can share as blessings with those we meet throughout the day.

When the kingdom of heaven is nowhere to be found, turn off the news and go looking for it in fields and kitchens and oysters and fishing nets. The kingdom of heaven is everywhere, and we all have a seed of God's truth planted in our hearts. Amen.

I am grateful to Jo Anne Taylor for inspiration for this sermon.

<https://pastorsings.com/2017/08/13/training-for-the-kingdom-sermon-on-matthew-13-31-33-44-52/>