

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Another parable Jesus put before them, saying, "The realm of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which someone took and sowed in a field; it is the smallest of all 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 told them another parable. "The realm of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened"

The realm of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and covered up; then in great joy the finder goes and sells everything and buys that field.

Again, the realm of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold everything and bought it.

Again, the realm of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when the net was full, it was drawn ashore and people sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close 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 Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the realm of heaven is like a householder who brings out of the treasury what is new and what is old."

Sermon 7/24/2011 by Susi Kawolics

My daughter has a game called "Tribond." The way it's played is that players are given three words, and have to figure out what they have in common. Some are very easy – for example: "A Rabbit's Foot", "A Four-Leaf Clover", "A Heads-up Penny." The answer would, of course, be –"Good luck charms." Or "Sunflower – Poppy – Sesame" and the answer is: They're all seeds. One is: A salt shaker, a wheat field, a piece of Wood. Guesses? They are all things that have grains. Here's one that's a little more abstract – "Imagination" "A Rubber Band" and "The Truth." - These are all things you can stretch. This card might be appropriate for today, because as I read this passage, I thought that Jesus was perhaps stretching it a bit with these parables of the realm of heaven. But, if the makers of the "TriBond" game need a new card, they could use these three words: "A mustard seed", "Yeast" and "A pearl". The answer would be "what the Kingdom of heaven is like."

These three images, the mustard seed, the leaven and the pearl, are the ones that most caught my imagination as I thought about this passage. And because they are images and parables, they are meant to engage the imagination, to be looked at from different perspectives, and to be played with a bit. Parables are not meant to define, but rather to give us insights. Therefore, they are an appropriate way for Jesus to talk about God and the Kingdom, realities that are too big to be exactly defined by us.

The first image Jesus uses for this Kingdom of God is that of the mustard seed. It is a tiny seed, sown into a field. In the right conditions it grows into a

great shrub, in fact, Jesus says: it is the greatest of shrubs, one that invites birds of the air to come and make nests in its branches.

We can look at this as a beautiful picture of the way the reign of God works. The smallest seeds of kindness, tiny grains of love that we sow into the world can have a huge effect. They can help create a world where people, like those birds, are sheltered and welcomed. If we think about the tiny Christian community which came together after Jesus' resurrection, this small group of dedicated believers, who preached the gospel - they started something small over two thousand years ago that grew into the worldwide Christian community we know today. This way to understand the parable of the mustard seed, as something small that grows into something much bigger is fairly straight-forward and does not require much of a stretch of the imagination.

The same can be said for the second image - that of yeast that a woman took and mixed in with flour until was all leavened. Yeast is an amazing substance. It is actually a fungus that feeds on sugar, and releases alcohol and carbon dioxide. The carbon dioxide gets caught in the other ingredients, like the flour, causing the dough to rise due to the air bubbles that form.

So here again we can provide a rather unambiguous interpretation of this parable: We sure know the difference between hard, dry, dense unleavened bread, and moist, soft, airy leavened bread. We can think of the yeast as God's love and grace in our lives. When we take this into our hearts, which may have been closed and hard, our hearts become softer and more open. Or, perhaps the yeast granules can represent people who might seem small and insignificant, but make a large difference in our world nonetheless. They are almost invisible, or may even disappear in a crowd, yet working behind the scenes, their very presence seems to raise everyone's spirits.

The third image is that of a pearl of great price. Pearls are formed inside oyster shells. The shells have a hard outer layer, and soft inner lining. Sometimes a foreign substance, like a piece of sand, slips into the shell between the layers. This irritates the inner layer, and the oyster's natural reaction is to cover up that irritant to protect itself. It does this by secreting a substance called nacre (Naker), which keeps forming around the foreign grain, and eventually forms the pearl. Again, in this parable, we also have an object which starts out small and insignificant, and eventually becomes a treasure.

So these three parables all tell of small grains that surprise us by growing larger than would be expected. And they become completely transformed into things of value. In the same way, when we change and grow into the people God created us to be, we too become valuable in building the Kingdom of God, in bringing God's love to people in our world.

After telling these parables, Jesus asked his followers "Have you understood all this?" and they answered, "Yes." And we too would probably answer this question in the same way. And so, since we all understand, I guess I could just end my sermon here, with these explanations. But actually, that would do a disservice to these parables. Because, you see, when it comes to parables, they are never that straight forward. They are meant to surprise us, to puzzle us, to make us think more deeply. Jesus' parables are meant to stretch us and our imaginations. So what else could these images could be telling us about God and the Kingdom?

Today the explanations I gave might make sense to us, people living in the 21st century. But those early followers of Jesus were probably not exactly being truthful when they said "Yes" - they understood all these parables.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast would have presented some definite challenges to their understanding. When Jesus talked about the mustard seed being sown into the field, any of his listeners who were farmers, or who were devout Jews would probably have thought, "What in the world is he talking about? Who would sow mustard seeds into their fields?" David Beswick says: *Mustard weed was the kudzu (if you're from the US South) or poke weed (if you're from the US Midwest) of ancient Palestine. No farmer would choose to keep mustard weed around long enough to grow as large as this parable describes it.*

The mustard plant was a weed of disorder, and the Jewish people were to keep orderliness in their lives and in their fields. Richard Swanson, in his book on the gospel of Matthew says *"Living a Jewish life means living a life that witnesses to the stable and orderly love of God in all things. Planting a weed that was a symbol of wild disorder was judged to be an unnecessary compromise of the basic principles of a Jewish life."* And that sweet image of the mustard shrub providing a home for the birds to come and nest in? That would not have sat well with the farmers either. What farmers would want to attract birds to their field, birds that would feast on their crops?

And the yeast parable would also have provided some image problems. The baker woman of Jesus' time did not go to the store to buy the convenient date-stamped Red Star yeast that we have today. When she made bread, if she wanted to leaven it, she had to use an old piece of bread dough that had been placed in a warm, dark, moist spot and had grown mold on it. This was then mixed into the new dough to make it rise. And, for the Jews, it was actually unleavened bread that was considered holy. When the Jewish people purified their household, they had to take out anything leavened and discard it. Also, the rabbis had a saying that: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." This translates directly into our saying "one bad apple spoils the whole bunch." Leaven, or yeast, was actually seen as a corrupting agent, as something rotten that would spoil everything, not as something that could raise things up.

So now what do these images of wildness and corruption have to say about the Kingdom of Heaven? Why did the writers of Matthew include them in this gospel?

The book of Matthew was written for a church in transition. It was a community undergoing a transformation from a predominantly **Jewish**-Christian church to an increasingly **Gentile** church. This led to tensions among the people in the community, and required a lot of stretching by those Jewish-Christians to re-evaluate their beliefs, to be more flexible with their orderly laws and rules, to be more inclusive with the Gentiles and their customs. These parables, which speak of change, surprise and inclusion, challenged the early church community, and they also challenge us today.

Jesus calls his followers to see a valuable crop in what others might call weeds, to see preciousness concealed in those whom others would call corrupt. By associating with tax collectors and prostitutes, by going to the homes of outcasts, he showed the rejected ones to be worthy of his companionship and love.

When Jesus says that the Kingdom might look like a disorderly, wild mustard shrub, or moldy piece of bread dough, he is calling his followers to look around with new eyes, to look at the things we see differently, and to be aware of those things they might not notice. These parables tell us that the Kingdom of God is found in unexpected places, but also that it is found in hidden places. Just like the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast granule disappearing into the bread, and the pearl concealed in the oyster, the Kingdom of God is not always out in the open, obvious places. Sometimes we are like Woody Allen, who accuses God of being an underachiever and says: "I would believe, if only God would give me a clear sign -- like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank."

But that's not how God works. In the smallest of gestures, a seed of hope sent in a card as a sign of caring, a loaf of bread given as a sign of support or hospitality, a precious pearl of wisdom or a word of encouragement given in love – these are all small signs of God's Kingdom on earth. Barbara Brown Taylor says that Jesus talks about heaven *"in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and merchants buying and selling things . . . to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map but that "X" marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities in our lives. . . There are clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullness of our days. . . in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives..."* They may not look like much on the surface, but they are glimpses of God's presence, of God's love in our world.

Our faith starts out like a small grain of seed, yeast or sand, and then transforms and grows. Sometimes that growth is neat and orderly, and leads us to comfortable places. Other times, transformation is difficult and challenging, because it calls us to stretch our vision to see God in hidden places, to stretch our minds to be open to new ideas, and to stretch our hearts to welcome those people we would rather keep out.

May God guide us as we grow and stretch for the sake of the Kingdom. May we expand our vision, unlock our minds, and open our hearts to all that is and all who are part of God's realm on this earth. Amen.