

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it 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.'

33 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.'*

44 '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.'

45 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'

47 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

51 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' 52And 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.'

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I play Words with Friends with several people on the computer. For those of you that don't know, Words with Friends is similar to Scrabble, except you can "buy" hints about where possible words can go, or "buy" a chance to swap tiles without losing your turn. You can also opt to find out where the best play would have been after you've played, just for future reference. All of these actions cost coins, which you can earn by playing the computer, watching ads, succeeding at the game, or even paying real money for.

Sometimes I just try to make words with my tiles. You never know what might work as a word. In a recent game I earned a bunch of points for the word "wigeon." I didn't know what a wigeon was, but the game said it was a word, so I used it. My opponent then asked me what it meant. Now the game will tell you the definition on the sidebar, but perhaps she didn't see it. So, I had to look it up. Just so you know it's a version of duck called a dappling duck, smaller and more compact than regular ducks. My point in mentioning all this is that sometimes we take something and just try to fit it into our current situation, and we may not really understand what it is, what it means, or what it meant at a previous time.

So, you may be wondering; why is he talking about playing a word game this morning? The reason is because this morning's gospel lesson is a group of five parables. A parable is a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle. The problem with the parables of Jesus in general, and the ones we are looking at today in the gospel of Matthew, is that the simple meaning of the parable is not that simple to understand.

Maybe the folks that Jesus told the story to understood them easily, maybe the gospel writer contemporaries caught on right away as well, but over the centuries we have moved away from the practices of those times, and what should be simple to understand is now a little more

difficult. Even with experts in history, anthropology, and language, we still can interpret these simple parables in many different ways.

I think each of these parables has a different message, in other words Jesus is not trying to say the same thing five different ways. I also think that we need to not look at them as examples of the church. Many scholars and ministers over the years have equated these parables to the church, but Jesus was very specific about what he was talking about. For each one he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." He is talking about the kingdom of heaven. So, let's break each one down a bit and see what we can glean from them. I have a feeling that what I'm going to present might be a bit of a fresh look at something that we have tended to interpret differently than Jesus did.

Our first parable is about the kingdom of heaven being like a mustard seed. It should be noted that the parable actually says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field." I think I've mentioned this before, but no self-respecting Jew would ever knowingly plant a mustard seed in a field. One of the rules of planting for Jews was keeping fields of crops separate. Much like most farmers around here today, you do a field of corn, or a field of soybeans, but not both intermixed.

Based on the wording of this parable the mustard seed wasn't a mistake, that got overlooked and accidentally got mixed in with the other seed, nor is there any implication that this mustard seed was planted by "the enemy" like the weeds in last week's text. In the scripture it says it was taken (showing purpose) and sown (showing intent) in his (showing possession) field. In other words, this particular sower is purposely putting this mustard bush into a field that it does not belong in.

The kingdom of heaven then is something different from the world that is here, much like the mustard bush is different from the crops that are in the field. The text says it grows into a tree, which is a bit of an exaggeration, a mustard bush can grow to be 10 feet high and be very large, but that is not really a tree.

Here's the part that I find interesting, because I don't really recall hearing or reading anything about it. Jesus goes on to say, "so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." To our ears that sounds nice doesn't it? Birds sing sweetly, they may even look pretty, after all Jesus didn't say what type of bird. I wonder if the farmers that were listening to this at the time were quite as pleased. I wonder if birds sheltering in that "mustard tree" would also then feast upon the crop that was planted in that field. I'm guessing we don't worry as much now days about birds eating the crops because the fields are so big and the yields are so much better, but people put up scarecrows to ward away birds for a reason, and I'm guessing folks back then would have not been pleased to have birds eating away at their hard work.

But the kingdom of heaven is like the mustard bush. It grows big to shelter the birds, who then can take advantage of all that grain in the field. The kingdom of heaven shelters the enemy of those who plant the field. So, what does that mean for us today? Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is a shelter for those who don't fit into society. Perhaps God has concern and wants to provide for those who society would rather keep out? Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is something that doesn't fit in with the well-ordered world/society that we try to create?

The second parable is similar, yet different. When we think of yeast we think of packets or jars of powder, but that is not what yeast was to Jewish people back then. I think of it as similar to sourdough starter, and since many of us were on lockdown for the quarantine, bread baking became a hobby for some folks pretty quickly. Yeast was grown on a portion of old bread that was kept in a dark, warm, and moist place to grow mold, which would raise the bread. It was

finnick and difficult to maintain, if you let it go too long it could poison you! This would get mixed with flour to raise the bread. Before the Passover celebration every year Jewish people would thoroughly clean their homes, making sure to get rid of anything with leavening agents, because they were considered a corruption.

It should also be noted that the parable says that the leaven was mixed with three measures of flour. Anyone know how much three measures of flour is? It's about 10 gallons. This is enough flour to make bread for 100-150 people! That's a lot of flour.

So, the kingdom of heaven is like a small amount of corrupting agent that is mixed in with a large quantity of something else until all of it was contaminated. What is Jesus saying? Perhaps he is saying that the kingdom of heaven is everywhere? Maybe he is saying that it has the potential to change the world? How would someone who wanted their bread unleavened react to finding all the dough to be rising? How do we react to changes in our world view? We have beliefs and ideas about how things are supposed to be, but what if God is going to bring in a change agent that will turn everything upside down for us? How are we going to react to that?

There is a break in the text between the first two parables and the last three. I'm not ignoring those missing verses because they were used in last week's scripture and are Jesus's explanation of the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

Jesus's next parable is, "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."

What was this person doing in someone else's field? Were they working for the person, or were they just wandering through? If I was in someone's field and found a treasure, and then hid it there, and then bought the field would that be considered a bit shifty? Like finding oil under someone's land and offering them a low amount, knowing they don't realize what they have? It's like going to a garage sale and seeing rare carnival glass dishes for sale for \$0.25 a piece, when you know that you can sell them for \$30, am I obligated to let the seller know? These are interesting questions, but I don't think that is the focus that Jesus was aiming for.

Maybe we should be focusing instead on the fact that once the person finds the treasure, they cash in all their belongings to buy the field that the treasure is in. Upon finding and recognizing the value of the treasure the person does everything within their power to obtain it. If we correlate this parable to the leavened bread then this person sees the kingdom of heaven that has been mixed thoroughly in the world, and once realizing it's worth, does everything they can to obtain it. Some people are not actively seeking the kingdom, but when they find it, they recognize the value.

Do we see the kingdom of heaven in the world? If we see it, are we going to recognize its worth? This parable is about someone who happens to stumble across the treasure, and they recognize the value, then they are willing to give everything to obtain it. Perhaps this is a message that anyone at any time can become part of the family of God?

The next parable is similar. But has one major difference; The merchant is actively searching for that one special pearl, he or she doesn't just stumble upon it. Much like the previous parable they are also willing to give up everything to obtain it.

How much are we willing to pay or sacrifice to obtain the kingdom of heaven? I think that is the question. Ideally, if you are listening to me today you are searching for the kingdom of God, but will we recognize it when we see it, and will we be willing to pay the cost to get in?

I was up on the North Shore last week. We spent a bunch of time on the beaches looking at rocks. I usually look for agates or crystals, no matter what size or shape. When I posted a picture on Facebook someone noted that they thought they saw a heart shaped rock in the picture,

it threw my mind for a momentary loop because I would never have thought to look for a heart shaped rock. Maybe, we are so busy looking for what we think the kingdom of heaven looks like we are missing what it actually is?

The final parable seems to have a similar lesson to the wheat and the weeds parable, “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.”

Here's something interesting to think about; the kingdom of heaven is the net. The net catches all the fish, the good and the bad, it is the angels that sort the fish after they have all been in the net. In other words, all the people (or fish) go to heaven (in the net). After they are in heaven they are sorted, and some are cast out.

Jesus doesn't really give us what the parameters are for good or bad fish, then again that really shouldn't matter to us, the fish aren't sorting themselves, or each other, God is giving the angels the guidelines. God makes the final decision.

What does all this mean? What can we glean about the kingdom of God from these parables? I think the kingdom of God is going to be a surprise for us. It's a revolutionary way of looking at things and doing things, and God is going to be doing things differently than what we think. The kingdom of God is everywhere and is slowly changing the whole world. The kingdom is for those who aren't looking for it, but if they see it and recognize its value, they should be willing to give up everything for it, just as those of us who are actively looking for the kingdom to come must be willing to pay whatever price is necessary to obtain it. Finally, I think that God will bring everyone together in heaven, and then do the sorting of those who will stay and those who will not, and God's parameters may not be what we assume they are. Let us hope that we all can understand as Jesus's disciples. Amen.