

Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 31-33 and 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; **32** 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."

The Parable of the Yeast

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with^[a] 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; **46** on 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; **48** when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. **49** So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous **50** and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Treasures New and Old

51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." **52** 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

This summer, we've been using the lectionary texts from Matthew and texts from our church wide study of Mark in our worship together. Matthew uses a lot of material from Mark, so you may have noticed some continuity. The last few weeks in Matthew have been focused on parables related to agriculture- sowing seeds, wheat and weeds together in one field, and this week starts with one as well, the mustard seed.

This chapter in Matthew contains 7 parables. Mostly short narratives with a formula of comparison, "the kingdom of heaven is like." This phrase appears 8 times in this chapter, half of those in the section we read today.¹ With each one, the pace and the urgency seems to quicken. Why would Jesus do that?

It's important that the crowds, the disciples, and disciples like us know what the realm of God is like. Not because it is just a far off reality that will one day be realized, but because it is also present and active right now, even when it seems most hidden to us. It's important to Jesus that we know what the kingdom of heaven is like.

"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."

A mustard seed, so small becomes a great shrub. You may be able to imagine a mustard seed if you have some grainy mustard at your house, or you have some seeds in your spice rack, but it might be hard for you to imagine- it's hard for me to imagine- what a whole mustard bush looks like. It wasn't a particularly valuable object to Jesus' listeners either. It was a

¹ Carter, W. (2004). Chapter 13. In *Matthew and the margins: A sociopolitical and religious reading* (pp. 280-299). London: T & T Clark International.

weed, a trash bush, taking up valuable garden space. Like the wheat and the weeds earlier, it had grown up right alongside all the other plants, possibly unnoticed.

Our modern equivalent might be kudzu.

How many of you have done battle with kudzu? When I was growing up, I remember an infestation of kudzu in our red tip bushes. The kudzu grew over the tops, choking out the sun to the spotty demise of the towering, fiery tipped foliage. I remember many weekends spent unraveling, pulling, cutting, trying to halt the spread of the kudzu.

Kudzu

Can you imagine Jesus telling you that the kingdom of God is like a kudzu sprout? We can well understand that it grows to the greatest of vines, but is it possible for it to have a less nefarious purpose? Can you envision kudzu even becoming shelter, a dwelling place for God's creatures?

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. A tiny thing that grows in amongst all the other vegetation, a shrub taking up space that then becomes the center of the place. A shelter, a tree, where the birds of the air come and dwell. It's value is hidden to our perspective, but that mustard seed always had value from God's perspective. And God transformed it from even a shrub, to a great tree and a safe resting place.

What was once viewed as a trash bush, of little value, becomes a great tree, a dwelling place. Has your understanding ever changed over time? Something you didn't really notice became valuable? Our understanding often emerges over time and in new ways.

Around the same time in my life that my family was battling the kudzu in the red tips, an artist visited my school, Nancy Basket. Nancy was so inspired by the landscape and natural resources of South Carolina that she moved here from the Pacific Northwest. She began making baskets from pine needles, but when the cost was too prohibitive she started looking for other

materials. She found that split kudzu vines could be easily woven into baskets. When she came to share her story with us, Nancy showed us how to make paper from blended kudzu. She makes paper designs, cards, and yes- still baskets. Kudzu transformed, redeemed into art, a place of shelter, a way for children in rural areas to connect with their world and create.

Jesus reminds us that the realm of God is already present. Like a seed hidden deep in the earth, that may be invisible to us in stages, or may not look like much is happening. The realm of God is not far off, but already present transforming the way we understand things, the way we value things or the things which we prioritize in value. The value is already there, we have only to see it, discover it, have the humility to uncover it.

The humility to uncover, to look for God's transformative vibrance in everyday things, everyday actions. "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." In a small amount of leaven, worked into the dough, God grows abundance, enough for a feast. Leaven also was different to Jesus' listeners than it is to us today. I thought that it was like yeast, the worst that could happen would be you would scald it, but leaven was spoiled leftovers. Fermented pieces used to activate the next dough. Use too little and you could ruin the flour, use too much and it could be deadly. And this was enough flour for a heavenly banquet, a heavenly visitation. The realm of God is present, in a seemingly ordinary task that produces enough food for a feast. A delicate balance that God transforms into abundance.

What has value? Do we see the realm of God in our everyday tasks? Are we looking, expecting, hoping for God to transform them into acts that provide shelter for the vulnerable or a heavenly banquet?

Some of you may be like me and the thought of God transforming and upturning seems joyful and yet, a little unnerving and unsettling. I am a planner.

I've also been an elementary school teacher, so I certainly know how to be flexible and change directions quickly, but I like to begin with a plan, a structure, an order that I can wrap my mind around.

I can think of moments when I was teaching a lesson and I suddenly thought of a different way to illustrate something, or a book that would go perfectly, or a student shared a thought that became an inside joke for our whole community, or they shared a hidden talent that brought us closer together. We plant in rows, we bake according to recipe, and the realm of God is hidden right there too.

But the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a pearl you never expected, like a treasure you stumbled across.

As one commentator says, "the kingdom of heaven is a tiny little symbol of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things, invading the cultivated soil of our certainties and our boundaries, creating something new and greater.

What we thought we knew is redeemed by our surprising God."²

What has value? And who has value? In this story, the characters are a farmer, a woman, a field hand, and a merchant- an unlikely cast for those who foster, discover, and uncover the kingdom. The realm of God invites us to have humility to see the valuable treasure in one another.

I read a story recently from Father James Martin in his book, "Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life." He describes how psychologist Robert Coles tells a story about Dorothy Day in his biography *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*. While Coles was a medical student at Columbia University, he took the subway downtown to the Catholic Worker house to do some volunteer work. He was excited to meet the famous Dorothy Day. When he arrived he found the great woman sitting at a table talking to an unkempt, woman who

² Bartlett, D. L. (2014). Proper 12. In *Feasting on the word: Year a* (pp. 284-290). Westminster John Knox Press.

was obviously drunk and ranting and raving. Dorothy was listening attentively, from time to time asking a quiet question that would only rev the woman up again. Coles remembers thinking, "When would it end?" Finally, the woman quieted, and Dorothy got up, walked over to Coles and asked, "Are you waiting to talk to one of us?"

She didn't assume that he was there to meet the great Dorothy Day, but instead assumed the value of the child of God with her. Who has value? Every day, ordinary actors reveal, discover, knead in the kingdom of God.

The realm of God is so valuable and so present, Jesus is telling us. It is where you least expect, seemingly small and hidden, but no less shocking and awesome in the growth, shelter, dignity, and abundance.

May we have wisdom and humility to seek the value in hidden storehouses all around us. For the treasure is so valuable, so precious, so joyful it is worth all that we have. Amen.