

July 24, 2011 ~ Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 3: 5-12; Psalm 119: 129-136; Romans 8: 26-39; **Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52**

SIMILES – IT'S LIKE THIS...

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsiQCx_gsQ8&feature=related

One of my favorite theological writers and thinkers, Barbara Brown Taylor¹, reminds us that one of the most difficult things about believing in God and in the *kingdom of God* is trying to talk about it. Someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do and there are no words that seem to fit – to do justice. You rummage around for something to say, but everything sounds too vague or too pious or too silly. It is challenging – perhaps impossible – to speak directly about holy things. How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can mere words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God?

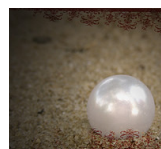
Even Jesus piled up a plethora of disparate images in the simile binge that is our reading from Matthew's gospel this morning: the kingdom is like...

a mustard seed that someone took and sowed...
yeast that a woman took and mixed in...
treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid...
a merchant in search of fine pearls...
a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish.

Perhaps the *kingdom of God* is more of a verb than a noun – the reigning or governing or leading of God, more than the reign. Jesus is not really comparing the kingdom to five things, but five actions – sliding easily from the agricultural to the culinary to the marketplace and to the fishing trade. It all seems jumbled together. Jesus says that the kingdom isn't so much like the objects themselves but more like the actual process of what happens in these little stories – the mysterious and powerful things that happen right beneath our eyes – even if our eyes can't seem to see what's happening. So the *kingdom of God* is not some lifeless thing that we can look at and appreciate: it is life and action and response to God's call.

We tend to talk about things that overwhelm us or that we can't really get a handle on in terms of what we can – describing holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trusting each other to make the connections. Believing in God is like coming home, we say, like being born again. It is like jumping off the high dive or getting struck by lightning or falling in love. We cannot say what it is exactly but we can say what it is like. That is what Jesus is doing as he throws out these various images at a fast and furious pace. The images come quickly – one right after another – no preparation – no explanation – no time to digest or to think or to explore.

Five flashes of the *kingdom of heaven* that come at us like snapshots – like scenes glimpsed through the windows of a fast-moving train – zing, zing, zing – like we are not supposed to over think them – to get stuck on any one image but to be dazzled by the number and variety of the things the *kingdom of heaven* is like – like *this* and *this* and *this*...



There are a couple of striking things about the images presented – their essential hiddenness and how unexpected they are. The *kingdom of God* turns out to be utterly surprising in nature. It's quiet, modest, hidden – you mostly happen upon it in unlikely locales. It looks small, even tiny and foolish. The kingdom can even seem to disappear completely the way a seed gets buried in the soil – the way yeast incorporates into the dough – you couldn't separate it back out again if you tried. God's kingdom looks as insignificant as a grain of mustard or a packet of dry yeast. Yet these tiny things have great effects – the kingdom can change us, and through us the world.

We might see the mustard seed story as encouraging – charming, but the mustard tree – shrub, really – is, after all, a weed – remember the preceding parable of the wheat and the tares? It says that the enemy came and sowed the weeds – no one in their right mind – no good and sensible person – would plant a wild, profusely growing weed – like mustard – in their garden. In fact, there were religious problems in even suggesting one might do so since living a Jewish life at the time meant living a life that witnessed to the stable and orderly love of God in all things. Planting a weed that was a symbol of wild disorder would be judged to be an unnecessary compromise of the basic principles of a righteous life.

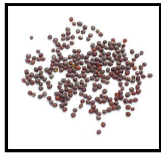
This mustard tree – this weed – is a humble – even disturbing – image indeed for something as marvelous and transforming as the *kingdom of God*. The parable hints that the kingdom is breaking into the world in a disarming and, for many, disenchanting form. We are constantly taken by surprise at the mysterious workings of God in our ordinary, everyday world.

Taken by surprise, but often offended, too. Jesus' audience would have considered leaven unclean and corrupting – the scriptures regularly use "unleavened" – without yeast – as a metaphor for the holy. In a culture like ours where leavened bread is common – popular – we don't hear the story the same way – we miss the offense and perhaps the power of what Jesus is saying. Leaven was a symbol of moral corruption, like the one rotten apple in the barrel. What does this historical context do to our understanding of the parable Jesus tells?

The kingdom is here but it is modest. It is hidden – quiet. Those who discover the kingdom sometimes tend to come across it almost by accident. The kingdom is a great treasure – something you're going to stumble on in some remote field if you're lucky. The person who owns the field won't even know it's there, but once you find it; your joy will be so massive that you'll do whatever it takes to buy that field. Or maybe you are already searching for something precious when you come across a pearl of greater value than you could imagine and by your own skill you manage to obtain it. You trade it all in for the *kingdom of heaven* – everything you have is trivial by comparison – for that which is rare but attainable if you are willing to pay the price.

We can't miss that phrase in the parable about finding the treasure that almost jumps off the page: "*in his joy.*" Jesus doesn't say, "In his greed," but "*in his joy.*" We might safely assume that these three words are important to the meaning of the parable – that the *kingdom of God* has much to do with joy.

Jesus concludes with an image comparing *the kingdom of heaven* and a fishing net – thrown into the sea the net gathers fish of every kind – good and bad – which are sorted out once the net is full. Here the kingdom is not something we find but something that finds us and hauls us into the light. Once we find the tiniest glimmer of God's love for us – or it finds us – that glimmer will expand throughout our hearts, our minds, our entire being, until we shine with the divine light for everyone around us to see.



The *kingdom of heaven* has to do with these things: farmers in fields – women baking bread – merchants buying and selling – fisherman sorting fish. It has to do with disrupting the status quo – challenging what we might perceive as corrupting – finding what is hidden and knowing what is of value. It has to do with joy and divine love and our response to being found by God. Our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map – “X” marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities in our lives. We get distracted looking for the next big thing but God’s breaking into the world is more like a controversial wee seed, or yeast contaminating the dough, or an invisible pearl that makes the field valuable. God’s small stuff changes the whole nature of what it “infects” – this is the transformation that is *the kingdom of heaven*.

The *kingdom of heaven* is hiding in plain sight – in everyday life. It is small – seemingly insignificant – not flashy or obvious. Maybe this is why projects like “Think Small” or “Warm Toes” or our small contribution to the meals at *Our Place* each month appeal to us so much – why we respond with such enthusiasm. As we look to the *kingdom of heaven* we behold the face of God in those we are able to comfort, those to whom we offer these simple gifts and those for whom we pray. Some of these people are hidden in plain sight – the marginalized and broken people in our city for whom these small acts of kindness and generosity may be the quiet leaven of God’s love.

A kingdom is a place where one person’s influence determines what happens. In the case of the *kingdom of God*, the kingdom is not for now a geographic spot on a map but rather the *kingdom of God* is present any place and every place where the influence of Jesus’ living presence determines the shape of life. Wherever and whenever Jesus’ wisdom, Jesus’ wit, Jesus’ savvy, Jesus’ words, and Jesus’ love mold the words, actions, thoughts, and life patterns of some person or group of persons, then there is where God’s kingdom is manifest.

Finally Jesus asks, “*Have you understood all this?*” And the disciples answer, “Yes.” I wonder if that was like me and grade 12 math, when the teacher said, “Understand?” And I said, “Yes,” not having a clue but knowing that was the expected response!

Then Jesus 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.*”

There is something about the gospel that is simultaneously old and familiar and new and shocking. Today’s series of parables tell us that the gospel message – the message of the kingdom or the *kingdom of heaven* itself, has a power that is deceptive, small, hidden, disturbing and perhaps offensive, but is nevertheless so great that the wise will give everything they have for it. The truth of the gospel is as old as old can be – as new as a baby – as fresh sunrise – as unexpected as forgiveness.

“Have you understood all this?”

“Well, sort of – maybe – I’m trying to – I want to...”

¹ *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004, pages 39-45. This message relies heavily on the work of B. B. Taylor. It reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh