

## 8thPENTECOST:July30'17pr12 RCL-A

What do you think the Kingdom of Heaven is like? What images define heaven for you? Streets of gold? The river of life? A glorious family reunion, with Jesus himself as one of your family members?

When we think about the Kingdom of Heaven, we actually may be torn between two kinds of images. The first image is a very practical one: the heavenly city, meeting Jesus, and reuniting with those gone before. The second image is much more mystical: our experiencing God as “high and lifted up,” our becoming a new “me” dwelling in the light of God, or our becoming united with God in some way. We may finally conclude that neither of these images is better than the other, knowing that it’s OK to think about both the practical and the mystical.

Today, Jesus gives us a third set of images of the kingdom of heaven. At first, these images seem to be very down to earth, portraying mustard seeds and pearls and yeast and hidden treasure. These are not the images we usually associate with the kingdom of heaven. Mustard seeds aren’t nearly as flashy and appealing as streets of gold or the river of life. The only image that comes even close to our high expectations is the image of a “pearl of great value.”

The minute we hear Jesus speaking about ordinary things like mustard seeds yeast, however, we pay close attention because we know from past experience that Jesus often uses everyday objects to teach us about heavenly matters. How does he use these objects to teach us this time?

There are a couple of ways to approach to approach what Jesus is teaching us here. The first way is to carefully dissect each part of each parable, assigning a meaning to each and every word and then figuring out Jesus' point. For example, the tiny mustard seed, which can do great things, could stand for the size of our faith. However, identifying some of the main themes of the parables may be more worth our while. Taken together, these themes paint a picture of Jesus' ideas of the kingdom of heaven.

One theme that stands out right away is that the kingdom of heaven is full of surprises. A tiny mustard seed grows into a huge, nurturing tree. A little pinch of leaven transforms all of the flour and other ingredients into delicious bread. One small, single pearl is worth the sale of all of one's possessions.

What kind of surprises might we someday discover in the kingdom of heaven? Will we find that people we scorned as "one of them" in the host gathered around God's throne? We may learn that the cup of cold water we gave to a hot, tired stranger is worth a lot more than our McMansions and fashion forward clothing. We'll probably learn that a small random act of kindness, an act we've completely forgotten performing, is exactly the treasure Jesus has in mind when he talks about a treasure hidden in a field. Often, Jesus treasures what we don't think to treasure.

Something else that stands out in these parables; just about every object is something very small and insignificant in size. A mustard seed doesn't measure up in size to a big seed like a lima bean. A pinch of yeast is overwhelmed by the amount of flour it's dropped into. Single pearls are valuable but they are even more so when they are gathered into a necklace. Not one of these tiny

objects is extremely powerful in and of itself, yet when they are used in the right way they can become powerful indeed. Jesus is telling us that God will honor any of our efforts at ministry, no matter how small they may seem to us. Knowing this reassures us as we minister to the world around us.

Another characteristic these tiny objects share is that something happens to each one that brings out the power that's within it. With the mustard seed, it's being planted in good soil and enjoying ample sun and rain, otherwise the seed is simply "dead." Yeast, leaven, doesn't have much personality of its own until it's combined with other ingredients and warmth and time. Something else, something extra is needed to transform the seed and the yeast into something that is bigger than themselves.

Once again, Jesus helps us see that the extra something we experience in our life and in our ministry is God and the action of the Holy Spirit. Our great joy of our being the people of God is knowing God is always ready to come into our lives and ministries to transform them into something we never could imagine. Or, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "we plant and water but God gives the growth." This reassurance can make us brave enough to dare just about anything in our life and ministry, like our parish opening our chapel to the public or thinking about setting up a coffee house right in our undercroft.

Having reflected a bit on these parables, we may think we've exhausted their meaning, but there's more, as the TV commercials say. The very last part of the Gospel reading, after the fish and gnashing of teeth, is puzzling. Matthew writes:

*Jesus asked the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And then 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 old and what is new."*

The first part of the puzzle is the disciples answering Jesus with a collective, bold YES! Remembering that Peter's very quick and bold responses to Jesus sometimes got him into trouble, we might wonder if these disciples really know what their bold answer might bring them. Another part of the puzzle is Jesus' favorable reference to "scribes." In other parts of the New Testament, the Jewish scribes are villains plotting Jesus' downfall. Here, however, Jesus talks about scribes who are "trained for the kingdom of heaven," evidently a different group than the Jewish scribes. And, why are these different scribes compared to generous masters of houses?

Well, needless to say, there are Bible commentators who can help us solve this puzzle. Commentators tell us scribes were not just copyists but learned teachers that possessed great knowledge that they were trained to share, rather like a generous master of a household. Next, scribes or teachers "trained for the kingdom of heaven" were, in reality, Jesus' disciples who accepted his teachings, becoming "Christian scribes," as it were.

Finally, when the disciples boldly declared they understood what Jesus was saying in his parables, they too became Christian scribes, or more importantly, teachers of the Gospel. With their enthusiastic YES, the disciples actually responded to Jesus' call to teach and preach the Gospel to others by retelling his parables and telling their own unique stories. There were probably times,

later on, when the disciples wondered what just they had gotten themselves into. There are times when we people of god probably feel the same way. But the disciples continued on in faith and so do we.

The parables Jesus tells us today show us the kingdom of heaven is a unique, surprising place, indeed. Having heard and understood his parables, may we, like the early disciples, answer Jesus call to become “scribes, teachers, trained for the kingdom of heaven” so we can do our part in bringing in the kingdom.

AMEN.

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