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Common Parables  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

What do a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a merchant seeking valuable pearls, a net, and a man who sees treasure as both old and new have in common?

According to today's Gospel lesson, all six of these things are like the kingdom of heaven, as told by Jesus. All these things: the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the merchant, the net, and man with a treasure are all parables Jesus told. And they come quick in today's Gospel. No breaks, no breaths, no interpretations, just parable after parable after parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Scholars differ on their explanations as to why Jesus told parables. Some suggest it was a way to keep his message from being too offensive to religious authorities. Others suggest it was a way to test who was really listening. Others suggest it was Jesus' playful way of engaging people, getting them to think a little deeper about God, about who Jesus is and why Jesus came. Perhaps the truth is a combination of all the explanations, much like the six parables in today's Gospel are a combination of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

I admit the parable of the mustard seed is one of my favorites. I love it because the kingdom of heaven isn't always what it appears to be on the outside. Like the TARDIS in *Doctor Who*, the mustard seed is so much bigger on the inside when it germinates and grows it becomes so large, strong, and stable there is room for many birds to make their nests in its branches. The mustard seed becomes a sanctuary, a home.

The parable of the yeast might be familiar to folks like my husband who have taken up baking bread during the pandemic. I have friends around the country who decided to bake their way through this unprecedented time, even though many of them have been challenged by the empty shelves in stores. It has been interesting to notice people in different places have had different shortages of baking supplies. For some it was flour. For my husband, it was yeast. He couldn't find yeast anywhere here in Athens or on-line. Lucky for him my mom found some and sent it to us. We have experienced firsthand how important a small portion of yeast is in making bread suitable for providing nourishment in these times. Like the mustard seed, yeast isn't much to look at, but it has a dynamic impact and value.

Likewise, the treasure someone found hidden in a field was so impressive it inspired them to sell everything they owned so they could buy the field along with the treasure. Perhaps this parable is a little more challenging than the other two. What kind of person sells everything they own to buy a field in order to get the treasure only they know is hidden in it? Isn't that a little extreme? Why not take the treasure instead? But remember, the kingdom of heaven isn't like the person who found the treasure. The kingdom of heaven is like the hidden treasure that is so valuable the finder realized it is worth buying the field. Perhaps there is more to the kingdom of heaven than just the kingdom itself. Perhaps there is value in what the kingdom of heaven is connected with.

That dynamic connection might be seen in the searching merchant. In this parable Jesus may be suggesting the kingdom of heaven isn't necessarily passive, waiting to be found by seekers or stumbled upon by those who weren't looking for it. Perhaps Jesus is suggesting the kingdom of heaven is actively seeking out what God values. And of course, what God values isn't jewels or gems or money or fame or prestige or stuff. God values something far more precious. God values you. God loves you. God values relationship with people, so perhaps God's kingdom of heaven here on earth is seeking you and seeking people of all ages, colors, genders, background, socio-economic status, because of God's love for humanity. And when God's kingdom of heaven encounters such treasure, it gives up everything to be with you. Like Jesus gave up everything to die on the cross, and through his resurrection any barrier between humanity and God is gone forever, so that we can be together with God and help with the kingdom of heaven work here on earth.

God's love for all people might be seen in a net that is so big it brings in a great diversity of fish, like God's kingdom here on earth makes room for all kinds of people. Which means we somehow have to learn to live with each other and love each other because when it comes to the final judgment that isn't our job. The kingdom of heaven is more about reaching out and making room than it is tossing out undesirables. That is different work for a different time.

And let's not forget the man who values the old and the new and calls both treasure. This, Jesus says in his final parable for the day, is what every "scribe" of the kingdom of heaven is like: a man with a treasure that is both old and new. Perhaps this is where we are invited into the day's many parables. As scribes of the kingdom of heaven we are meant to understand what determines value, and therefore what to treasure.

In God's kingdom of heaven value isn't determined by age. It isn't determined by appearance. It isn't determined by location. It isn't determined by quantity or size. Value isn't determined by the past or future potential.

Value in God's kingdom of heaven is determined by love. God's love. Like the mustard seed, the kingdom of heaven is reaching out to be that place of sanctuary for God's beloved to rest in. Like the yeast, the kingdom of heaven shows love is dynamic. Like the hidden treasure, the kingdom of heaven waits for God's beloved to discover the connection it offers and like the merchant also seeks for those God loves. Like the net, God's kingdom of heaven makes room for everyone God loves. And those who work for God's kingdom here on earth see all things, the old and the new, through the eyes of God's love. Which means no scribe of the kingdom of heaven would ever judge a mustard seed or yeast by their appearance, or see the field as separate from the hidden treasure, or imagine God's kingdom of heaven is inactive, or be disappointed in the diversity the kingdom of heaven makes room for, or mistakes value in only the old or the new, but makes room for both because they understand both old and new are required for kingdom of heaven work here on earth.

Perhaps these parables of Jesus' can be helpful for us as we find ourselves living in a pandemic that has changed so much of our world. Gone are the days when we could leave our homes without wearing a face mask. Social distancing requirements and concern for preventing the spread of the virus means once common activities we wouldn't think twice about like eating in a restaurant now make us think twice about the risk such activities pose. Similarly, ministries that have defined Church of the Good Shepherd like our Wednesday Free Lunch suddenly seemed impossible to continue during the pandemic until we started having conversations with volunteers who care about it enough to imagine making changes to the ministry to minimize the risks as much as we can for everyone. When re-imagining the Wednesday Lunch ministry, we started with simple, small ideas, like providing a sandwich and piece of fruit in a paper sack, allowing volunteers to prepare the food at home, and distribute the sacks on tables outside with a volunteer more than six feet away. This might be closer to how the ministry started, so that the old way is new again. And we can trust that from something that seems small, great things can come, as has happened in the past. This is one way Church of the Good Shepherd can continue to show God's love for all people and our love for God and our neighbors, by making changes that value the love, and is therefore a taste of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

I began this sermon with the question what do a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a merchant seeking pearls, a net and a man who treasures both old and new have in common? The same thing they have in common with our ministry and worship here at Church of the Good Shepherd: the love of God in Christ here on earth.