

Jesus Told Them Another Parable

He put before them another parable: "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."

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."

"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."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Mt. 13:31-33; 44-45)

When you think about heaven- I wonder what comes to mind. Clouds, harps, a place where you reunite with loved ones, maybe- or at least a small number of very carefully selected loved ones. Maybe it's more abstract, a place where every tear is wiped away and all the things that bring us pain, all the walls we throw up- all of these are no more. And, at least for me, in heaven there better be no email. I'm pretty sure the Bible promises this- somewhere in the middle, maybe.

However you imagine heaven, all of us have been trained by countless paintings, cartoons, movies, and jokes to think of heaven as a particular place, with a definite place in space and time. When it comes to space, or location, we've been trained to think of heaven and earth as existing on two different planes or levels. Heaven exists somewhere up there, somewhere out there, and earth sits right here beneath our feet. If any of you watch Seinfeld, some of you may know the character Kramer, known for his strange ideas- in one of my favorite Kramer moments, Kramer had this idea of transforming his apartment into a kind of human gerbil pen by building all these ladders and tubes:

“Levels Jerry! Think levels!” Kramer wanted to build different levels or floors into his one floor apartment. This is how we think of heaven and earth- in levels. God is like Kramer, and Heaven is up, and earth is down.

We’ve also been taught to think of heaven in terms of time- heaven, of course always being in the future, specifically when we die. Right here, right now, we’re on earth, but when we die- then we will go to heaven. Heaven exists some time in our future.

Well, without wanting to upset the apple cart too much this morning, let me say we will have a very hard time understanding what Jesus is talking about with this mental picture of heaven and earth- a picture of levels and of otherworldly futures. While certainly there is some truth to the ways in which we’ve been taught, the way Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven here is really, really different. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in an immediate, this-worldly, kind of way- did you notice? For Jesus as he delivers these parables, the kingdom of heaven isn’t somewhere separate from us in time and space, it’s actually a present tense reality, (the kingdom of heaven “is like” not “will be like”) a present reality. And it’s one that is this worldly- as common as a mustard seed or pearl. For Christ, the kingdom of heaven is like an alternative reality in which we can participate right here, right now. For Christ in these parables heaven is right here. It’s right beside us. It’s all around us. The problem is, as close as it is, as much as it is all around us- the problem is we don’t see or experience this kingdom, this alternative reality, very often. And when we do catch a glimpse of this other reality- it’s hard to put into language exactly what it is we’re experiencing.

Maybe the closest we get to this in our own language is when people talk about being in the zone. I've heard people who play tennis or golf or basketball use this expression- I've also heard musicians and artists use it, too. Have you heard of people talk about being in the zone- those times, those moments when we're completely in sync, when we're completely absorbed in whatever is we're doing- we're not doubting ourselves, we're not worrying about what people are thinking about us, we're not distracted- we're just in the zone. And there's a gift-like quality to this experience- you can't work hard to get yourself in the zone, it's a state that just comes upon you when you're already working or moving. I think this is very close to what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of the kingdom of heaven- these times when we're able to truly be ourselves, when we forget about all of our self-doubt and self-criticism, all of the grudges we bear, all of the ancient wounds- when we experience the kingdom of heaven, this alternative reality, we experience what is to be fully human, fully ourselves, absolutely loved and valued- those times when we just know we are children of God, and this is enough. This is enough for us, and we feel at peace.

Well, let's look at these parables, these funny little stories he tells- and see what we might learn.

We'll look at the first two together: the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast. Both of these parables point to the hard to sense, often invisible, and seemingly insignificant nature of this alternative reality and how even just a few experiences of this can change our entire lives.

He put before them another parable: "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." The mustard seed is the smallest of the seeds in the Middle east- but when it grows, it grows into this huge bush, this huge tree. Sometimes the smallest things, the most over looked things- are really the most important. Henry David Thoreau experienced this when he retreated to Walden Pond for his experiment: "Live simply!" he exhorted, "And suck the marrow out of life!" Thoreau found amazing insight and joy in the simplest of actions, like finding and skinning his own meal, and in the construction of his cabin.

When Melissa and I visited Boston once, we went to Walden Pond. I was disappointed at first to see how close it was to everything- I just had this image of it being a million miles away from the world. But with time, I actually think it's even more interesting that Thoreau didn't really leave the world behind. One of the great insights of the Reformation is that our own lives, our own vocations as parents, friends, lovers, bankers, lawyers, and teachers- in our daily lives the Holy sits hidden in the mundane. The parable exhorts us to keep our eyes peeled- because even a tiny seed, even a short report on CNN or the wall street journal, a conversation with a friend, even the smallest corners of our little lives might be hiding the presence of God. And you just never know.

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."

Are any of you bakers here? I am. Well sort of. I had a batch of sour dough going on our window sill until it turned into a bit of science experiment recently. Melis was looking at it at one point and said, "Is it supposed to be that color?" Never a good sign. One of the things that draws me to bread making is the mystery of it- how such a tiny amount of yeast, really about an ounce or so, can leaven an entire batch- five or six cups of flour. Such a small amount of these little yeasty beasties are enough to raise up such a large amount of boring old flour.

You know, we're like this Christ says. As much as we would like to be all yeast, all active in the presence of God all the time, just basking in our sense of meaning and purpose, this really doesn't seem to be how we're made. And in an adult faith, we have times when feel close to God, when we know who we are and can speak so clearly about our sense of call, but mostly we have flour times when we're not so sure- and we pray and pray and wonder if we're just talking to ourselves here or what. It's like any other long term relationship. You have times when you feel close- and then you have those seasons of distance. It's not that you aren't in love anymore- it just seems to be the way we're made.

And what's fascinating here is that Christ acknowledges that most of life isn't in being like active yeast, but in the boring old flour. Most of the time, in other words, we are these three measures of flour, most of the time we do not go around filled up with this amazing experience of the kingdom singing hallelujah all the time. And this is ok, because we're also given this tiny amount of yeast, we're given these small, potent, moments in our lives when we do know in our very bones that God has named us, and claimed us, that we are valuable no matter where we've been or what we've done. We

have these memories, as small as they may seem, as thin as they are, and Christ tells us here these are enough. This yeast is enough.

See, being a person of faith doesn't mean having all these incredible experiences all the time and never doubting and always being shiny and happy- that's called being a lobotomy patient. Being a person of faith is trusting in this miracle that these rare moments really are enough to get us through- that these rare, yeasty moments, even though they don't happen all the time, are enough to leaven the rest of our days.

The next two parables I want to read together:

“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.”

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

In both of these stories two people end up being confronted with a choice- and the choice is really about where they want to focus their attention, focus their lives. This morning I just want to talk about the first guy, the one that finds some treasure. He's got kind of dilemma on his hands, because while he wants to keep the treasure he finds- he doesn't really want to be pinned down by it either having to guard it or invest it or whatever. So he buries it, thinking it'll be safe there and then he can just go back to his regular life, only now he's got this safety net he can rely on.

And I think most of us are like this guy. We know somewhere in our heads that the real meaning of life, the real treasure in life, is in loving God and loving our neighbors, blah, blah, blah. We know the real treasure in life is in the love we share with one another. Yawn. We know all this. But the way we act, the way we spend our time,

you really wouldn't guess it. The way we act we tend to take all of our treasure for granted, like these people are always going to be around- and so we spend most of our time getting caught up in other things, all of our best laid plans. And so it's like we bury our treasure- thinking they'll be safe there underground, and we can then just focus on all this other stuff.

But then sometimes, sometimes something happens to us- like it happened to this guy in the parable. And we realize what we've done- we realize we've kind of buried the only thing that really matters. And when we do this we rush around hoping it's not too late.

On Friday I came back early from the beach to celebrate a memorial here. A couple who had visited this church years ago, the husband in the couple had died suddenly a week and a half ago, and we did the best we could to help this family to both grieve and honor his life. Many people spoke, and I was so impressed with each one of them- it's a hard thing to sum up a person's life and what they meant to you in a few short pages, and each did such a good job. I found myself laughing and tearing up for a person I had never even met.

One of this man's friends spoke towards the end, and after a touching and funny account of their working relationship, the man said his one regret was that he never told this man that he loved him. Because he did. He just always assumed there would be more time, more BBQ's, more parties. And I realized who this man was, speaking up there- he was the man who was wanting to buy that field and dig up that treasure, because he realized now just how important it was. And he left us all with a challenge- to call at least one person we haven't talked to in a while this week just to see how they are doing

and to tell them we love them. And it was like he was putting a shovel into our hands and telling us to dig- that nothing could really be more important.

Well, I mentioned I was away last week. Melissa's mom and dad rented a house on the beach for the week, and her entire family, and quite a few friends headed out there. At one point I think there were 9 adults and 2 kids living in one house. And it was a spacious house- but still, it was a lot more people than I'm used to. And I'll tell you, I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but I really had a pretty tough week.

Melis and I don't get a whole lot of time together, and I think this puts a little extra pressure in my mind for the time we do have together. And trying to sleep with four of us in one room, with Will and Ella and each of their sleep peculiarities, and the two of us- it wasn't exactly relaxing, at least not in a spa escape kind of way. And I was getting a little grumpy about it. I said to Melis at one point I felt like we were in one of the video games I played as a kid. The games I played as a kid were incredibly simple compared to what they have these days- in my day you basically had a character who only did a couple of things, and to juice it up a little bit, they would just change the background from time to time. So you'd have a character that could run and jump, maybe- and to make it exciting he'd be running and jumping through deserts in one level, and then in the next it would change to an arctic snow field. The game was exactly the same; they just changed the scenery. And that's kind of what it's like vacationing with small children- you're still changing diapers and trying to reason with kids who have had way too much sugar and way too little sleep; only now we were doing it at a beach house

instead of Tualatin. I thought it was pretty funny, actually- I don't remember that she laughed much.

Well, then I started to feel bad about being grumpy. I mean the absurdity of being grumpy at the Oregon Coast was not lost on me. I mean there are people starving and dying in the world- people who would love to have one day on the coast much less 4 or 5, and here I am grumpy about it not being just so. I mean who do you say this stuff, to, without conjuring up the world's smallest violin that's playing just for you?

So I was grumpy, and then I was grumpy about being grumpy, and it was turning into a full blown funk. And I was beginning to get on other people's nerves- Melis reported her mom was asking what was wrong. Making me sound like a temperamental old car, she helpfully responded, "Oh, he just gets like this sometimes."

I decided to switch up the playbook. The family went to the beach, and I decided to hang low around the house and pick up a book I'd been avoiding- Anne Lamott's Plan B. I absolutely love Anne Lamott, and I was avoiding it worrying that reading her would make me guilty about not writing as much and just make my funk go from the bad to worse. But I picked it up anyway. Here are the first words of the book: "On my 49th birthday, I decided that all of life was hopeless, and I would eat myself to death. These are desert days." And I know this sounds strange, but I immediately smiled. Lamott is an incredibly well known and successful Christian writer- someone who could at least pretend to have her life pretty well figured out at this point. And reading piece after piece in which she allowed someone like me to see the sacred in her life generously mixed with the profane- the screaming fight she had with her son after preaching one day, her inability to forgive her crazy mother, her disastrous attempt to start a Sunday school

program- it was like the voice of God telling me if she could feel this way as a successful writer, I could be in a funk on the beach, too. And the strangest thing happened- as I kept reading, I started to chuckle. And as I chuckled, I started to laugh.

I'm not going to tell you I wasn't still a little grumpy when everyone came back. But I was enough better to at least acknowledge it to Melis and tell her I was sorry- which I finally was. And I don't know that two hours with Anne Lamott redeemed the whole week for me- but like a tiny mustard seed, like a little bit of yeast, she brought me back into the mindfulness of God's kingdom- back into mindfulness of the pearls and treasures surrounding me, and if we believe what Christ says- maybe this is enough. **Amen.**