

We get these five little parables together in the lectionary, but in Matthew's Gospel, they are woven together with the longer parables of the sower and the weeds among the wheat as well as two explanations. Some of these Jesus told to the disciples and to a crowd, and some only to the disciples. And when Jesus asked the disciples if they have understood, they said, "Yes." And I think they did.

You and I may have a little work to do.

Jesus, do you see, did not describe an immediately recognizable or easily anticipated kingdom of heaven. He *could* have said "heaven is where we will all gather around the glory of God in peace, love and harmony." I'll bet most of us, myself included, would say "yes, *that* I understand." Maybe it's even true.

But that isn't what Jesus said. What he *did* say implied that the realm of heaven is more like an invasive, polluting, somewhat shady, maybe even illegal, dragnet. That's what the disciples would have heard anyway.

So, if they truly did understand, they knew something about parables. They knew that parables don't try to *describe* the realm of God's heaven. What Jesus offers in parables is an *experience* of heaven. Jesus uses commonplace materials and recognizable characters to *evoke* some element or another of God's in-breaking realm and presence in his listeners' daily lives.

But we have different cultural interpretations for the references he uses. Mustard seeds, yeast, buried treasure – these no longer evoke the same immediate experiences for us. Two thousand years later, we've tamed the heaven out of them.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven, *not faith*, mind you, but the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. We tend to think this means something like "big things start small." And while that's often true, that's not what Jesus is saying heaven is like.

First century Mediterranean farmers considered the mustard plant to be a wild, invasive weed whose little seeds got accidentally packed into bags of crop seeds. Mustard plants were notoriously difficult to control once they appeared and the resulting 15-foot tall bush might be fine for the birds but problematic for the farmer.

By referring to a simple mustard seed, Jesus stimulates an image of the in-breaking realm of heaven spreading uncontrollably, like kudzu or crabgrass.

Then Jesus says that God's heaven is like yeast. Our 21<sup>st</sup> c. interpretation tends toward something like "a little faith goes a long way." And there is scriptural support for that notion, but Jesus here is *still* not talking about faith, but about

heaven. Jesus also has no knowledge of our tidy, dry instant yeast. In his day, people made yeast or “leaven” by storing bread in a damp, dark place until it attracted wild yeast fungus spores and began to ferment. Pungently aromatic wild yeast has to be maintained. If it doesn’t ferment enough, the yeast won’t cause bread to rise. If it ferments too much, it can be poisonous.

And for Matthew’s largely Jewish audience, bread leavening had to be carefully monitored. Jewish women preparing for Passover would meticulously clean yeast from the house, and then guard the making of unleavened bread to make certain that no fermentation took place.

Jews could use yeast the rest of the year, but “three measures” of flour is nearly 50 pounds. That means the woman in the parable has hidden yeast into enough flour to make bread for hundreds of people.

So, even if Jesus surprised them, his listeners would have envisioned heaven as a wild, fragrant transforming agent hidden in a community’s primary source of nourishment.

After explaining the parable of the weeds and wheat to the disciples, Jesus then tells them that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. We tend to stop there, satisfied to talk about heaven being “...like a treasure hidden...”

Except first century Palestinians would have heard other details and made some assumptions that we no longer do.

The man who found the treasure was not the owner of the field. So, he may have been a servant working for the landowner, or a tenant farmer who had rented a patch of land or just a trespasser. In any case, his behavior is suspect.

He reburied a treasure that he found in a field that didn’t belong to him and then bought the field without disclosing its true value. Until he buys the field, he’s at least guilty of property damage and possibly trespassing. We might consider him shrewd, but the ancient world would have found his behavior immoral and bordering on injustice.

His disciples would have heard that finding the kingdom is joyful, but finding it and trying to keep to it oneself can be corrupting.

Next, Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a merchant in search of fine pearls. 21<sup>st</sup> c. Americans often refer to this as the parable of the “Pearl of Great Price” because, we say, the kingdom of heaven is like a beautiful pearl worth everything. And that may or may not be true. It’s just not what Jesus said.

The kingdom is not like a *pearl* in this parable...it’s like a *merchant*. Now, in the ancient Middle East, people stereotyped merchants as self-serving, greedy and opportunistic. And the merchant in the parable appears to have recklessly

gambled the entire shop on one deal and, like the man who bought the field, now has nothing to fall back on.

Like a *merchant*, Jesus implies, once *heaven* finds what it values, God's *heaven* will unexpectedly give up anything and everything to possess it. And what heaven values, do you see, what heaven values is *you* and me. *We* are the pearls that God treasures for God's own.

Finally, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a net thrown into the sea that gathered every species. Extremely conservative evangelicals read this to mean that heaven is where the good fish and *only* the good fish get to go. But Jesus didn't say that heaven was like a basket of good fish. What he said is that the realm of God's heaven is like a *net* that gathered "every kind," a better rendering of the Greek.

So, here's the picture Jesus paints in these five short parables: The realm of God's heaven is wild, uncontrollable and unpredictable. It gets into unexpected places and disrupts our sense of order. A tiny bit of God's heaven is so powerful that a woman could hide it in the daily lives of an entire community where it would create noticeable transformation.

The realm of heaven is a mystery buried in the heart of all creation—a field that includes all; that is, not just all of us but all that each of us is—each and every one of us in all our brokenness and our hurtfulness and our beauty; in all our sinfulness and our loving, our pettiness and our gratitude; in all our destructiveness and all our creativity.

God sees each and every single one of us as a great pearl worth emptying *God's very self* to obtain.

The realm of heaven is closer than we think, already pouring into our lives even when we can't feel it or comprehend it. We can never keep it for ourselves. In fact, because we see heaven as we hand it on to each other, the more of it we share, the more it takes root and invades in the most joyful ways.

But we do have to be careful because heaven's transformations have already led to all manner of counter-cultural behaviors such as, oh, say, standing up for the principles of respect and peace, justice and mercy; or resisting evil while promoting forgiveness; or seeking to serve Christ in all people.

And when the end of time comes, God's angels—not you or me or the Archbishop of Canterbury or Pat Robertson or any other human – *God's angels* will gather us all in and cast out all the causes of separation from God. And the fire of God's Holy Spirit will burn away all selfishness, evil and hatred.

Jesus asked the disciples if they have understood and they said, "Yes." So, contemplate these ancient teachings, these old treasures, and add them to

what God is making new. That's how we can see and understand more of the presence of God's heaven, and serve it better. That's how we can continue to say "Yes" to Christ until God's will is done in its fullness here on earth as it is in heaven.