

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He told another parable to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It’s the smallest of all seeds. But when it’s grown, it’s the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and rest in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, they pulled it to the shore, where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers. But the bad fish they threw away. That’s the way it will be at the end of the present age. The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people, and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

They said to Him, “Yes.”

Then He said to them, “therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.”

1. Perception

We human beings have a perception problem. We often think we have the proper perspective on an issue when in fact we are way off. There's a charming story that Thomas Wheeler, CEO of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, tells on himself.

He and his wife were driving along an interstate highway when he noticed that their car was low on gas. Wheeler got off the highway at the next exit and soon found a rundown gas station with just one gas pump. He asked the lone attendant to fill the tank and check the oil; then he went for a little walk around the station to stretch his legs.

As he was returning to the car, he noticed that the attendant and his wife were engaged in an animated conversation. The conversation stopped as he paid the attendant. As he was getting into the car, he saw the attendant wave and heard him say, "It was great talking to you."

As they drove out of the station, Wheeler asked his wife if she knew the man. She readily admitted that she did. They had gone to high school together and had dated steadily for about a year.

Wheeler bragged, "Boy, you were lucky that I came along. If you had married him, you'd be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a chief executive officer."

His wife replied, "My dear, if I had married him, he'd be the chief executive officer and you'd be the gas station attendant."

We often think we have the proper perspective on an issue when in fact we are way off. Jesus understood this—that humans get it wrong—especially when it comes to things spiritual. So he told a few parables.

2. **Fresh Ways**

Every musician or literary master knows that the secret of an award-winning composition is in its ability to resonate. Once you write a piece, you must then let it go, so that others can discover it, bond with it, make it their own.

Cooking works in much the same way. A good recipe is adaptable by the beholder. The idea and primary ingredients remain much the same. But the meal can be changed, dampened down, or spiced up, depending upon the context, audience, and the effect desired. This is not just good gourmet cooking—it's also gourmet evangelism.

Every time we want to teach someone something about the “old, old story,” we need to find a way to serve it up in a new, refreshing, and scintillating way. We need to present our old staples in a new recipe, give our old favorites a new pizzazz.

New teaching, old story. This is the basis for Jesus' discipleship lessons. This week in our scripture from Matthew, we see Jesus dishing out advice to His inner posse not just about what to teach but about how to do it.

We could call it “Jesus' recipe for a kingdom style feast” or maybe more pointedly, “Jesus' disciple-winning fish recipe.” For Jesus, with His usual parabolic flair, is giving His disciples new ways to present an old story.

3. **Jesus Says**

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to many things.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed—a small seed from which a great tree is produced.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which works its way through dough to produce loaves of bread.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure which someone sells everything to own.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who sells all he owns to own fine pearls.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that gathers all kinds of fish. They will sort the good from the bad after the fish is collected.

Jesus says that this last is the way things will be at the end of the age. The angels will sort the evil people from the righteous people, and the evil people will be thrown into a burning furnace.

Jesus used new ways to tell the old story.

4. Yeast

Sue D’Alessio, a member of our cabinet, wrote a devotion last week about yeast.

She said that yeast is strange looking, either a sticky mash or miniature pebbles, which don’t taste good and seem to be quite unpromising. On its own, yeast does nothing. Mix it with a little warm water and it begins to bubble and froth—add a little sugar and it works even better. It still doesn’t taste good and doesn’t do anything except foam. However, mix in a good amount of flour, stir it, beat it, knead it, and voila!—a lump of bread dough. Then watch—the dough grows, seemingly of its own volition. The small lump

expands, lightens and, shaped and baked, becomes a loaf of bread. Mundane. We all know this. Boring. And yet...miraculous.

Who knew—unless you'd been shown how it works—that this little bit of not-much is the basis for the wondrous sustenance of bread? Another aspect we don't often think about is that this doesn't work in reverse. We cannot extract the yeast once we've mixed it with the flour. The yeast has to disappear, give up its substance, in order to be a part of the miracle of bread. The yeast becomes invisible—and only then, what it does as a result, becomes visible.

Jesus claims that this mixing of yeast and flour is like God's kingdom. Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, invisible in substance, visible in results.

So too with the Spirit. Invisible, seemingly inconsequential. However, mixed in with our wordless lamenting sighs, stirred in with our yearning breathing hopes, beaten in with our fearful worried hurts, kneaded in with the substance of our weak, tender, courageous, vigorous lives—miracles happen. We cannot see the Spirit. And yet.....miraculous. Who knew that this Spirit-prayer is the basis for the wondrous sustenance of our lives? We cannot extract Spirit from our lives. The spirit has no physical substance and yet it is the miracle of life. The spirit is invisible—and is visible only in the results of our lives.

In these days—and all days--, when our sighs are too deep for words, the Spirit is raising our sighs into prayer. In these days, when we despair about whether we can find healing in all the brokenness and illness around us, God is kneading and shaping and raising us into new possibilities. The bread of life is broken, and it is in the sharing of this loaf, that we are graced with healing wholeness. God is with us, sustaining and filling us with God's life and love.

We are called to be the witness, the visible evidence of this invisible yeast of God's Spirit of life and love. Miraculous!

5. **Kingdom of Heaven**

To what would you compare the kingdom of heaven? It is like finding the technology stock you bought in the 1980s for fifty dollars and suddenly realizing you are a millionaire. It is like the owners of DeBeers finally finding the perfect diamond and selling a billion-dollar empire to have it. It is like the harassed physician, tired of the HMOs, selling home and BMW and finding bliss in a mission in the Congo.

What will we tell our congregations about the kingdom of heaven? What makes this kingdom any better than what can be gotten at the mall? Is it bigger than the consumer paradise promised every seven minutes while we watch the latest sitcom? Is it something that can be had only in the next life, so we must patiently suffer in this life to earn it? Will we be any closer to the kingdom of heaven if our party's political agenda is enacted, if our kids pray in school and have the ten Commandments etched in twenty tons of marble at the town hall, or if we properly observe separation of church and state? If we double the new member classes and exceed the demands of the annual budget, will we be any closer to the kingdom of heaven?

These may sound like silly questions. We may regularly let things less valuable than the kingdom of heaven take on ultimate importance. We might want to shove this thought into our unconscious, but worldly success too often is our measure of the kingdom of heaven. We can easily settle for much less than the life Jesus has to offer. Our churches and our spiritual lives suffer from an anemic view of what being a Christian can be. A paltry view of the kingdom of heaven in our midst is more defeating than doctrinal error or a lack of funds.

Jesus did not go to Webster's Dictionary for a definition of the kingdom of heaven. He stimulated the imagination of the people. Our life with God is better than the most breathtaking thing we can imagine. We plant tiny seeds, we search the fields for it, we scour the marketplace and when we find the divine presence, nothing else can compare. It seems that the searchers in these brief parables were not quite expecting what they found. They didn't know their seeds would grow so well, they stumbled across the treasure while working the field, and while looking for fine pearls they found one so incomparable. They were searching and working, but found more than their imagination.

6. **Glad and Sorry**

There is an ancient legend about some men who were on a long journey. They came across a great desert, and rode into a wilderness area. At sundown they came to a river. They got off their horses and knelt down by the river to drink water. Suddenly a voice spoke to them. The voice said, "Fill your pockets up with pebbles from along the river. And tomorrow you will be both glad and sorry."

So they did what the voice commanded. They got on their horses and rode away. On through the night they rode. Finally the sun began to peek over the horizon. They stopped and reached into their pockets and there they found diamonds and rubies. They held a treasure in their hands, and they were both glad and sorry. They were glad they had it, but they were sorry because they had not taken more.

The good news for us is we can have all we want of the treasure of His kingdom, all we are willing to take. If you will take that treasure you will learn it is the discovery of a lifetime.