

Sunday, July 26, 2026
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12A)
Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Hidden Messages”

Ok, pop quiz . . . what is the kingdom of heaven like? We'll make it easy. Multiple choice.

As we just heard, our Gospel reading for today contains not one, not two, but five parables, all beginning with “the kingdom of heaven is like.” Each time, followed by a short story—sometimes as short one sentence. Stories drawn from the fabric of everyday life. Stories about farmers, homemakers, merchants, fishermen. Stories that the hearers could relate to, because they either lived the life portrayed in the parable, or likely knew someone who did. Each story, taken at face value, seems to be pretty simple. Yet, each story is intended to paint a particular picture, drawing on the individual and communal experiences of the hearers. Pictures that, when looked at long enough, reveal multiple layers, and begin to reveal hidden messages.

This is the beauty of parables. At least to the original hearers. Jesus was teaching basic truths about faithful and righteous living—or as in today's Gospel, about the kingdom of heaven—using images his hearers could relate to. Images that transcended the words spoken. In this way, Jesus' teachings became more than just words; more than just images from everyday life. They became grounded in their everyday lives and experiences in a way that allowed them to take root, just as the plants in the parables we have heard the last couple of weeks.

Admittedly, we are at a bit of a disadvantage when it comes to deciphering Jesus' parables, to finding the hidden meanings in the pictures he paints for his audience. Most of us do not live the kinds of lives portrayed in the parables. Most of us do not have the frame of reference to fully appreciate what Jesus is saying, let alone to fully understand. Sure, we can gain some understanding based on the stories themselves. Based on common images or elements. And based on our broader understanding of Jesus' teachings and of how the kingdom of heaven is portrayed in the writings of the New Testament.

Those common elements are certainly a good starting point for our own understanding. After all, while each parable has its own nuances and may point to a unique quality or aspect of the kingdom of heaven, it is the common themes running throughout that particularly highlight and point to Jesus' core message. What I propose is that we briefly look at each of the parables in today's Gospel to discern the more readily apparent themes. And then to take a deeper dive in search of some hidden aspects that Jesus' hearers would have readily recognized, but which are less apparent to us. Themes that add to the richness of the overall picture of the kingdom of heaven being presented.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is among the best known parables. The smallest of all the seeds growing into the greatest of shrubs. This image highlights one of the most significant aspects of the kingdom of heaven: abundance. That which starts off as nearly imperceptible in this life, in our day-to-day lives, in the fullness of time becomes the vast expanse that we envision the kingdom of heaven to be at the end of the ages. But even beyond an eschatological, end of the

ages perspective, an image recognizing that the kingdom of heaven is growing in our midst even now. Ever expanding through the lives and ministries of the Church and the members of the Body of Christ. Providing a place of safety and nurture now, and promising the fullness of God's love and care through eternal life in and with him.

The Parable of the Yeast is, in many ways, like unto the Parable of Mustard Seed. The image of a woman baking bread and adding yeast to facilitate the rising of the bread. The yeast resulting in the dough rising and expanding, just as the kingdom of heaven expands over time. Increasing in its abundance. The yeast adding to the goodness of the bread, adding to the nutritional value of the bread. Just as the kingdom of heaven, in its current manifestation in this world, as well as the ultimate fullness, serves as a source of sustenance and nourishment to us in our lives of faith.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast being about the abundance of the kingdom of heaven. How from small beginnings in the present age, it grows and expands to have cosmic impacts in the fullness of time.

Jumping ahead in the order presented is the Parable of the Abundant Catch, with the image of fishermen hauling in nets full of fish. Here again, this parable has abundance as its central theme. Although, there is also an eschatological foretaste, not unlike the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds we heard last week. Focusing more on the end of the ages, the recognition that just as a huge haul of fish will undoubtedly contain good and bad fish needing to be sorted, so too, at the end of the ages, there will be a sorting of good and bad souls. Those who will be admitted into the kingdom of heaven for eternity, and those who will be denied. Perhaps Jesus subtly—or not so subtly—reminding his hearers that we are to do the best we can in this life to live as God desires us to. And that God will sort it all out in the end.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price shift focus a little bit. Saying something about the nature of the kingdom of heaven, to be sure, but also giving insight into one's view of and one's participation in the kingdom. At least, the perceived ideal. In the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, someone finds a treasure hidden in a field and sells all he has to acquire the field. And similarly, in the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, someone searching for fine pearls finds a pearl of great value, so sells all he has to purchase it. In both cases, the message is the same. First, that the kingdom of heaven, like the treasure in the field and like the pearl of great value, is of immense value to those seeking it. Of more value than anything else in this life. The extent to which the characters in the parables go to obtain treasure and pearl indicating the kingdom of heaven is priceless. Something to be desired at all cost. Which points to the second message. Whether found by accident or as the result of a long search, the kingdom of heaven is something of such great value that it is worth giving up everything else to make it their own. That as those who are people of faith and followers of Christ, seeking the kingdom of heaven should be our highest calling, our greatest pursuit. That, like the ones searching in the parables, we should be willing to sacrifice everything we have for the sake of the kingdom. Giving all we have in pursuit of it.

These are the most apparent themes contained in the five parables Jesus presents in today's Gospel. Namely abundance, providing nurture and sustenance, and being of great value. And yet, that is not the whole story. That is not the entirety of what can be gleaned from at least

some of the parables. That is not the entirety of what Jesus intended to convey. There are still a few gems hidden within the images presented in the parables. Hidden gems that further add to the significance of what Jesus wants us to know about the kingdom of heaven.

At least several of the parables contain hidden images that would have caused the original hearers to sit up and take notice. References that, to their ears (although lost to ours) would have been counterintuitive. And yet, which, in turn, would have added greater depth of meaning to the picture of the kingdom of heaven Jesus was painting.

The first of these is in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Mustard seeds were not something a farmer would intentionally plant. In fact, mustard plants are a highly invasive weed. The only way mustard seeds would be sown into a field would be if some accidentally got into other, good seed. Which was entirely possible, the seeds being so small. And because they did grow to be such large plants, the mustard plants were generally despised because they took up land that could be planted with other usable crops, as well as using valuable resources, such as water. So, why does Jesus use the image of a weed as an image for the kingdom of heaven? It is precisely because of the benefit Jesus notes in the parable: providing shelter and a place for birds to nest. Not that your average farmer would care about that. But creating a jarring enough disconnect to the original hearers. Calling to attention that even something that at first glance has little or no value actually does have value in the kingdom of heaven. This message would have particularly resonated with the poor and marginalized of Jesus' time. This message would have been incredible news to the poor and marginalized. Those who were viewed as having little or no value here and now actually do have value—have great value—in the kingdom of heaven. Highlighting the unbounded grace and hospitality of God's kingdom.

The Parable of the Yeast has a similar hidden gem. While we think of yeast as being a good thing, necessary for preparation of a variety of foods such as baked goods, and food items requiring fermentation, not so much in ancient times. In fact, yeast was generally understood to be evil or unclean. What is referred to as yeast in the parable is actually a more rudimentary form of leaven. Not the neat little packets you find in the baking supplies aisle at the grocery store. In ancient times, leavening for bread and other purposes was actually created by allowing old bread to spoil and ferment. Resulting in a stinky gunk that was not pleasant to work with. And creating and using leaven was a delicate balance. If it was not spoiled enough, the leaven was ineffective and therefore just a useless mess. If spoiled for too long, it not only ruined the bread, but could cause food poisoning. So, in using the image of yeast, of leavening, Jesus was noting that something that had to be used with caution, even with suspicion, when used under the right conditions is transformed into something absolutely delicious and nourishing. That even that which—those who—in this life may be looked upon with suspicion, in the kingdom of heaven are transformed, adding to the richness of the kingdom.

These are but a few examples of diving deeper into the images contained in parables. There are perhaps other, deeper images, even in today's five parables. But the point is that to more fully understand Jesus' teachings, we need to continually look deeper and more intentionally, even at those things that may seem obvious. Because nothing is ever completely obvious when Jesus starts in with the parables.

After delivering these parables, Jesus asked his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" To which they respond, "Yes." Jesus goes on to affirm their understanding, likening the disciples to scribes. Although not like the temple scribes, hung up on their particular interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, formed by centuries of institutionalized conformity. Rather, scribes who are open to digging into the Scriptures, digging into the mysteries of everyday life to see what treasures lie within. To reveal what the ancient Scriptures have to say about the kingdom of heaven. And, at the same time, to look at the world around them, to look at their day-to-day lives, to see how they, too, reveal something of the kingdom of heaven. Both here and now, and in the age to come.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." Can we answer the same? I think so, but only if we are willing to dig a little deeper. To look for the treasures of the kingdom hidden right under our noses.