

## Reflection for Pentecost 9 (30<sup>th</sup> July 2023) by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Over the past couple of weeks, we've been listening to the parables found in Matthew 13. These are parables that *read us*. How we hear them depends on the condition of our hearts. If we listen well, these stories change us. They teach us about God's kingdom, and *identify* us as children of that kingdom, showing us how to live into that identity. Listening is a key component to receiving the parables of Jesus. Jesus has not been saying, "those who have eyes, read along." He says, "everyone who has ears, listen."

In Matthew's gospel, there is great significance placed on hearing the Word of the Lord. In this thirteenth chapter, Matthew uses the word "listen" fifteen times. "But he also uses the verb ... 'understand' six times. In Mark's version of the parables, he asks us 'Do you hear Jesus' message?' But Matthew wants to know, 'Do you really understand with your heart?'" [\[1\]](#)

As we hear these parables, then, we need to be careful not to let them go "in one ear and out the other." They need to go deep into our hearts, where they can work on us and change us. Our hearing leads to obedience, and obedience leads us to transformation. The other thing we need to remember as we hear these parables, is that they are stories of the present kingdom of heaven. Even when Jesus explains some elements in terms of the end of the age, he is referring to a kingdom that is already among us, already here in the person of Jesus Christ. So let's take a look at the short parables Jesus puts before us in today's passage.

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.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes."

And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

You may have noticed these short parables are arranged in pairs. The mustard seed and the yeast tell of a kingdom that starts very small and grows exponentially large. Both mustard and leavening would have had some negative associations in the minds of Jesus' disciples. Mustard is an invasive weed, and the "yeast" Jesus mentions isn't Red Star Active Dry Yeast in a nice little pre-measured packet.

It was a lump of fermented dough, left over from the last batch of bread. If you've ever made sourdough bread from a starter, you have an idea of the kind of leavening Jesus was talking about. In Jewish understanding, leavening was a symbol for corruption. It was what you had to eliminate from your home in order to celebrate Passover.

Yet Jesus refers to the way mustard and fermented bread dough work as examples of the way the kingdom of heaven works. It may have begun from humble origins, but it is growing into something that cannot be contained. It may be hidden at the beginning, but it is unstoppable, pervasive, and abundant. Once a mustard plant takes hold, it spreads everywhere. The amount of flour Jesus mentions would have made enough bread to feed at least a hundred people.

Remember the abundant generosity of God, which Jesus described at the beginning of this chapter in the parable of the Sower? Here it is again! These parables warn us to not be put off by what appears unimpressive at first glance.

The people gathered on that beach listening to Jesus wondered if this humble carpenter who mixed with fishermen could possibly be the Messiah. In the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast, Jesus reminds us that "The kingdom, which has already begun with Jesus, does not come with a glorious bang ... ; rather, it comes unexpectedly, almost unnoticed. But all that is necessary is already there, and the end is present in the beginning."[\[2\]](#)

The next pair of parables focus on another aspect of the kingdom of heaven. They describe its value. Yet here again, there is an element of surprise in the example Jesus chooses to use. He talks about someone finding a treasure in a field, burying it again and going to sell all he has, in order to buy the field. But what was this person doing, digging around on someone else's land to begin with? Does this mean that the kingdom of heaven is like a trespasser?

Well, maybe not. Jewish law about found treasure could get confusing, but it basically followed the logic of "finders, keepers." Perhaps the person had a legitimate reason to be digging in another person's field – maybe he was being paid to remove a tree stump. We don't know, and Jesus doesn't seem to think such a detail is important. Jesus is focused on the joy that goes with discovering an unexpected treasure trove, and recognizing that it's worth everything we have to become its rightful owner.

Just like the merchant who was searching for good pearls, and came across one that he recognized as having great value, we should be looking for evidence of the kingdom of heaven. Whether you find it by surprise, or after diligently seeking for it, the fact that it is hidden from view makes it all the more precious, all the more worth our total investment. It's worth everything you have.

So far, we have a pair of parables that show how the kingdom of heaven might seem small and insignificant in the beginning, but it grows into something that can't be contained. And we have another pair of parables that describe how valuable the kingdom of heaven is. All four of these stories hint that the kingdom may be hidden from plain view, for those who do not have eyes to see, or ears to hear.

Let's consider the last set of twin parables. We heard the parable of the weeds last week, and you might have recognized some of its details in the story of the dragnet full of fish. These are parables about judgment. Both parables describe what will happen to those who ignore Christ's message. They both speak of angels who will separate the righteous from

the evil, throwing the evil into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We aren't comfortable talking about God's judgment in today's world. We don't want to offend anyone, or scare them away with stories of unquenchable fire, gnashing teeth, and wailing cries. Yet, just as surely as we are saved for the kingdom, we would have no need for salvation if there weren't something to be saved from. As the kingdom of heaven grows into its fullness and immeasurable value, evil must be pulled out from it and destroyed. Yet, it's important to recognize that Jesus did not belabour this point. For every parable of judgment, he tells five parables about joy, abundance, and uncounted treasure. Jesus tells stories that "envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading dough to plowing fields. Jesus transforms human life not by scaring the hell out of people, but by helping them see the heaven close at hand."[\[3\]](#)

Seeing the heaven close at hand, finding the hidden treasure of the kingdom and devoting ourselves completely to it – these are signs of discipleship. All of these parables in Matthew 13 are a call to follow Jesus into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus asks us, just as he asked his first disciples, "Do you understand this?" Do you have ears to hear and a heart that is open to understanding what you hear? Are you paying attention, and letting this kingdom of heaven, which is already present and at work, change you? Are you willing to be transformed and have your life turned around 180 degrees? If you can join the disciples in saying simply, "Yes," Jesus has one more parable for you.

"Therefore," he says, "every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

A scribe was someone whose life was devoted to copying down the words of scripture, and teaching them to others. Being trained as a scribe for the kingdom of heaven involves devoting our lives to the truth of the gospel, and sharing it with others. Jesus encouraged his listeners to accept him as the new treasure, which fulfilled the promise of the old scriptures. He offers us the same invitation.

Following Jesus may not seem at first to be what we hoped or expected it to be. Sometimes it appears to be an invasive plant, like mustard, growing and spreading unchecked. Sometimes it might smell like stinky fermented bread dough, hidden among enough flour to feed a hundred people who are hungry for the love of God. Sometimes we will stumble upon it like a treasure buried in a field, and sometimes we will only discover it after diligent searching.

"All of life is a seeking after value." Sometimes we find it easily, and sometimes we have to search for it, but often our sense of value is skewed. ... "The problem with most of us is that we would like a little of the kingdom as an add-on to the rest of our lives. We want to hedge our bets. We cannot hedge our bets with the kingdom."[\[4\]](#)

These parables urge us to abandon whatever we think is most important in life and focus entirely on what God is doing in the kingdom that is already here, already active. The gospel we proclaim must both deserve and explain the label "treasure," and our lives must express the ultimate value that is found only in Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is a promise that evil will one day be destroyed, and righteousness will shine – and in the meantime, God is working in us, changing us, calling us to let ourselves be broken open like a seed that dies in order for a plant to grow from it.

How do these parables read us, right now today? Do we have ears to listen? **AMEN**