

Proper 12A: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Speaking Sideways about God

One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about your belief. Someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do, and you're at a loss for words. You grope around for something to say, but everything sounds either too vague or too pious. You could talk about how your heart feels full to bursting sometimes, or about the mysterious sense of communion you feel with other believers, or about how even the worst things that happen to you seem to have a blessing hidden in them somewhere. But the truth is that it's next to impossible to speak directly about holy things. How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of *God*?

We do not do a very good job of it, that's for sure. But because we must somehow try, we tend to talk about what we cannot say in terms of what we can. Believing in Jesus is like coming home, we say, or like being born again. It's like jumping off a high dive, like getting struck by lightning, like falling in love. We cannot say what it is *exactly*, but we can say what it is *like*. If you think back to high school English class, you may remember learning about metaphors and similes—figures of speech where you talk about one thing by referring to another. Sometimes the comparisons are comfortable and familiar. Her lips were as red as a rose, as red as a cherry, as red as a robin's breast. But other times the comparisons are jarring or startling. Her lips were as red as a fresh scar, red like teacher's correction marks on a test, as red as spilt blood. And, when the comparisons aren't exactly what we expect, our understanding of things is broken open, and we are invited to explore them all over again, to go inside them and see something new.

Such is the case with Jesus' parables. Over and over again, Jesus would say "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this," "the Kingdom of Heaven is like that," telling his followers stories about brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and tares. Sinners are like lost sheep, he'd say, the Word of God is like seed sown on the ground, heaven is like a wedding feast. Now, if you grew up in the church, you've probably heard these comparisons so often, you hardly notice them. They've become trite, clichés. Yet when we dig into them, when we hear them as Jesus' first century audience would have heard them, we'd find that they are anything but trite—they're shocking.

Take the comparisons that Jesus draws in today's gospel lesson. Jesus begins with "the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed." Many of us were taught that Jesus is making the point here that big things come from small seeds. Yet, any seed would have sufficed for that point, not just the mustard seed. In fact, a tree seed or nut would have been better, as it grows from a small seed to a great tree. In fact, that's just the thing Jesus' listeners would have expected him to say. They'd know how the prophets promised that God would make Israel like the mighty cedars of Lebanon and the top of that tree would reach to heaven and its branches cover the earth. But

Jesus doesn't compare God's coming rule to a majestic cedar tree. He compares it to a mustard plant! There is nothing particularly impressive about a mustard plant. The mustard plant was a common bush you'd see in people's yards, along roads, in cracks in rocks, wherever seeds would land. And they had a nasty habit of taking over where they are not wanted and getting out of control. In other words, the mustard plant was a weed, the crabgrass or dandelion of Jesus' day! And that, Jesus said, is what the Kingdom is like: not like the mighty cedars of Lebanon, but like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Like a weed, God's rule is sprouting up everywhere, often where it is not wanted. And there's nothing we can do to stop it. No amount of weed killer will work. God's just and merciful rule has taken root, and will continue to grow even in the harshest conditions, just like dandelions and crabgrass.

Even more shocking is Jesus' comparison of the kingdom to yeast. You see, the yeast in Jesus' story isn't the yeast that we are familiar with, the kind that comes in those little packets that you buy at Krogers, domesticated baker's yeast. Rather, the "yeast" Jesus is talking about is wild yeast, yeast that is found on a rotting, moldy lump of bread. To leaven bread in Jesus' day, you'd take a piece of moldy bread and kneed it into the dough, spreading the yeast and mold throughout. I know—yuck! This explains why Jesus and others use leaven, yeast—as symbol of corruption: "beware the yeast of the Pharisees," Jesus tells the disciples a little later. According to the little story Jesus tells here, though, a woman takes some yeast (moldy bread) and then she "hides" it—not "mixes" it, but *hides* it—in the flour to leaven it. The only thing more astounding than this is the fact that the woman uses "three measures" of flour, which is enough to make bread to feed over a hundred people! We may be tempted to see this as another example of a lot can be made from a little, but Jesus' point here is rather that God's kingdom takes hold in hidden and unexpected ways, as a kind of "good corruption," subverting the ways of the world with God's ways.

The next two comparisons are somewhat alike. A guy stumbles across a treasure hidden in a field and sells all he has and buys the field. Another guy, a merchant, after searching for years, finds the most perfect pearl and sells his whole store and buys it. One isn't looking for a treasure but stumbles over it, the other is hunting for the prize and finds it. But they are both delighted by their find and have to have it, no matter what it might cost them. We may question the morality of the treasure finder who dupes the owner of the field out of the treasure, but that's not really the point. Rather, this story seems to be saying something about the value of God's kingdom, about how it is worth whatever risk or cost it takes to possess it. The treasure finder and the merchant sell all that they have, their whole livelihood, in order to buy their prized object. This kind of singleness of purpose, we are to understand, is how we are to approach God's kingdom. The two stories thus speak about what we are called to risk, what we are expected to give up. But they also tell us something about God, and what God was willing to give up for us. For God, the salvation of humanity and all creation is the pearl of great price, the treasure he was willing to give everything for, even his beloved Son.

In the last comparison, the Kingdom of Heaven is described not as a treasure we possess, but something that possesses us, that grasps us, like a great net that drags through water catching everything in its path. To be caught or not is not a decision for a fish to make. In fact, the word "fish" does not occur in the original Greek, but "all kinds of *things*," "good things and rotten things." The "good" things are gathered into baskets, but the "rotten" things are thrown out, he

says, just as the wicked will be thrown out by angels at the final judgment. The story thus warns of punishment for "evil-doers". But its main point is not that the wicked will "get it" in the end, but rather how the "saved" will be snatched up, caught up, dragged along, and taken to places and into situations we don't want to go. Caught by this greater power, we are not only taken up by God but also taken *over*, so to speak, and led to do all sorts of crazy things: associating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory types, giving away our money and time to benefit others, rejecting the lures of materialism and consumerism in order to faithfully follow Christ. In this way, we see, the kingdom takes hold of us, as much as we seek to take hold of it.

So here are five parables, five comparisons, that give us a sense of the surprising reality of God's Kingdom. Jesus concludes this lesson by asking his audience if they understand what he just told them. And the disciples answer ... "Uh, of course. Yeah, yeah, we get it, boss."

We laugh, but we are not much better at getting it either. For, after hearing these parables and the wonderful things they say about God's kingdom, many of us immediately want to go out and do our part to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. But this completely misses the point. These stories are not about what *we* can do or should do, but about what God *is* doing right now. As these parables indicate, the Kingdom is already becoming a reality in small and hidden ways, sprouting up like weeds, leavening everything like yeast, whether we do anything or not. Rather, our task is to point to where it is happening, where the Kingdom is breaking into our world, and to celebrate it. When we see a person come to faith, or a sinner forgiven, or someone's dignity restored, or justice done, we can say, "Look, there it is, God at work, the Kingdom of Heaven breaking in."

Let me tell you a story. Does anyone know who the first African-American baseball player in the American League was? It was a rookie by the name of Larry Doby. He played for the Cleveland Indians in 1947. He was reputed to be a good player, and an excellent hitter. He came to bat in this first game, and the fans waited to see what'd happen. Well, it was a disaster. He swung at the first three pitches and missed them all by at least a foot. He struck out. The fans "booed" him off the field. Doby stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down, and put his head in his hands. The next batter was second baseman Joe Gordon, an All-Star hitter, who had always hit this particular pitcher well. Everyone knew he could not only hit the ball, he could put it out of the park. He stepped up to the plate, swung at the first three pitches and missed each pitch by at least a foot. The fans could not believe it. A huge silence fell over the crowd. Joe Gordon stared at the ground as he walked back to the dugout. He went to the end of the bench, sat down by Doby, and put his head in his hands. Did Gordon strike out on purpose? Nobody knows for sure, except Joe Gordon. But, I can tell you this. It is reported that from that day on, Doby never went on the baseball field before he'd reach down and pick up the glove of his teammate, Joe Gordon, and hand it to him. Now, even if this act on the part of Joe Gordon meant what we think it did, it did not solve the problem of prejudice in the stadium that day. Nevertheless, it was a sign, a glimpse, of God's Kingdom breaking into our world.

The church moreover is to be a place where that Kingdom breaks in clearest. I know an 80-year-old, church-going woman who bakes oatmeal cookies twice a week in batches of 30 or more, then takes them to the local youth prison camp. When I first heard about it years ago, I thought

what a charming gesture this was. It's so nice for an older person to occupy herself baking cookies for others. But the superintendent of the camp will tell you that there's more to it than that. "Those cookies have transformed this whole place," he says. "Some of the young men who are incarcerated here have never in their whole lives received a gift from anybody until they got a bag of those cookies. They stand there at the door, behind the bars, eagerly awaiting those cookies, as if they were a bunch of little boys on Christmas Day, rather than a group of convicted criminals. Those cookies have changed them." Her cookies are for the inmates nothing less than a taste of Heaven.

Now we may be looking for great and grandiose signs of God's power. But, as Jesus teaches us today, it is in little and small ways such as this that God's Kingdom comes. Quietly, humbly yet powerfully. May God do so in your life and through you, in the lives of those around you. Thanks be to God.