

**Matthew 13:31-33,44-52**

*Jesus put before the crowds 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 come out and 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."*

We pick up today where Jesus left off last week. He is speaking to the crowds in the Galilee, and he is doing so in ways that are astounding them, most notably through the art of analogy. Jesus isn't just saying this plainly, as much as they would rather him do so. No, he's trying to explain what the Kingdom of Heaven is to them—he is trying to explain the unexplainable—and so knowing that he can't just map out the kingdom for them, he uses analogies. The kingdom is "like" *this*, he says.

Who does he say it to? The gospel writer Matthew lets us know he is still speaking to the crowds. These are common folk in the Galilee region, about a three hour's drive north of Jerusalem. They are people of Israel, Jews, just like Jesus, but they have always been distant from the holy chaos in Jerusalem. They are survivors, raising families as best they're able, tending to their fields and catching tilapia in the lake at their footsteps. And so, Jesus, in his attempt to explain the Kingdom of God, lobs out his first analogy.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed,” Jesus says. ‘Come again, Jesus? You say it’s like a seed? See, we’ve been taught growing up that the Kingdom of Heaven is gilded in gold and jewels, and those who hold the place of importance in this world—the chief priests and the royalty and the wealthy—they will also have the choicest seat in heaven. So, we haven’t put a lot of thought into the Kingdom of Heaven because we know our place in it, and it isn’t the nicest arrangement.

“So, Heaven is just like a mustard seed, you say? The smallest of the seeds that grows into, well, a big shrub. Many translations say it is a tree, but it’s really a more a shrub, but either way, you’re saying the Kingdom of Heaven is like a big shrub?”

You can imagine the puzzled looks on the faces in the crowd.

So Jesus leans in a little further. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast,” and again you can see their heads turning. Jesus is using the most common of images to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, and the crowds are confused by that. Heaven is distant and it is grand. It is beautiful, to be sure, but its beauty and its grandeur is what separates it from this world. This is the way they have come to know Heaven. Heaven is very far from the Galilee, they’re thinking, and so Jesus’s use of common images doesn’t make sense to them.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field . . . the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of pearls—how can the Kingdom of Heaven be like a pearl merchant, has Jesus *seen* the chaos of a seaport? . . . the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.”

Jesus inundates the crowds with a lightening round of analogies, and the crowd is overwhelmed. He has just painted the Kingdom

in a palette of ordinary hues, and so the crowd looks at one another, trying to interpret what its heard. You can hear the shuffle of body weight and a few baby cries, but for the most part everyone is silent. And Jesus looks at them and mutters, “Did you get all that?”

Yes?

A common interpretation of these analogies would note the common theme among them: each of them is a small thing that grows into a mighty thing. The mustard seed becomes a mighty shrub, albeit still a shrub, the yeast becomes bread, the net that is thrown into the sea becomes full of fish. Each of them hinges on faith and becomes more than is to be expected. Such is the Kingdom of God: a small bit of faith can grow into the most astonishing of circumstances.

But notice something else. Jesus doesn’t give the crowd a blueprint of the Kingdom of Heaven. He knows that if he were to do that, they wouldn’t understand him. Instead, Jesus brings the Kingdom of Heaven to them, pointing out the similarities between the holy of holies and the ordinary of ordinaries. “Look, look at this here. All the glory of God can be compared to this unassuming seed.”

And he does it in rapid succession. “Look over there! The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to that. Look at that right over there! There are similarities between that common thing you’ve never thought much of and the glory of God.”

Jesus is creating a habit of holiness among the crowd. Jesus wants the crowd to see God as utterly connected to them and their surroundings—not distant and removed—but accessible in all of life’s circumstances.

What would that look like for us today? I haven’t worked much with pearl merchants, I don’t fish with a net, and I am much more familiar with the mustard you pair with Philly pretzels and

not the simple seed. But Jesus's litany of analogies—his long list of comparisons—does suggest that more are out there, and that the task of people who follow Jesus like you and me is to continue to seek them out in our world today. This is the habit of holiness: to consistently seek God out in the world around us and to name it.

When my Grandmother was sick years ago, I asked my college chaplain to come visit her. I was there when he got there, my mother and me with her, and after a brief conversation, my college chaplain began to prepare for holy communion. All communions become encounters with the real presence of Christ, but hospital communions have that extra bit of meaning because they are so wrapped in need, the presence of God just as valuable as any medicine.

So he sets out his instruments: the paten to hold the wafer, the small chalice which he fills with wine, and then his silver pix, which contains the host. Except, he can't open the pix. It is sealed shut. We try running it over cold water, then hot water. We pass it around to see if anyone else's grip might be stronger. I go on reconnaissance searching the hospital for perhaps a spare bread roll, which I can't find.

Twenty minutes pass. We're running out of ideas. My Grandmother is getting tired. And so my Mom mutters, "Father, I . . . I, um, I have half a cheese Danish from Panera Bread in my purse."

I say to you, my friends, that in that hospital room, the three of us surrounding my Grandmother, the Body of Christ never tasted so sweet. Such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

If the pearls and mustard seeds don't work, that's just fine. But find something else. Maybe the Kingdom of Heaven is like a grocery run these days, and you're nervous about it a little and wonder what will be there, but when you arrive you see everyone wearing masks, everyone

keeping their distance to keep each other safe. You see the selflessness of the cashiers and the restockers, risking their lives to make sure your family doesn't go hungry. And you make it back and you think, "that wasn't that bad."

Perhaps the Kingdom of Heaven is like when you add a little bit to that grocery run and you come to church to drop off a donation, and you're astonished at how much has already been donated—multiple pews full—and maybe you see some of our parish children playing on the lawn, and the flowers look good, and you remember what joy this place brought you when we were all here together, coffee hours that lasted forever but the guac was good. Who knew you'd need guacamole at coffee hour? Such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Maybe the Kingdom of Heaven is taking this strange year and using it to reconnect with loved ones, texting an old friend which turns into a zoom meeting or a driveway social, and you're so glad you're back together, so glad to care for them once more.

Or maybe the Kingdom of Heaven is like my parent's new puppy, eyes so big, so excited to see you, so excited to show you her toys, just begging you to play with her.

Maybe that's what God himself is like: our life experiences nothing more than God begging for us to engage with him, play with him, be with him.

In this morning's passage, Jesus is breaking a sweat in order to inch us closer to Paradise. He's pulling out everything he's got to paint us a picture of that place. God is still doing the same today, each in our own experiences. When we are vulnerable to God at work in our lives, the Kingdom of Heaven becomes a little clearer because we are leaning into it. We see the Kingdom piercing through the clouds of our present reality and we find hope. We can't see the Kingdom head on, but we see its reflection all

around us, little shafts of light piercing through the darkness that all too often finds us, because even Heaven cannot contain Heaven's grandeur.

The crowd in Matthew's gospel says Yes. Do you understand what I'm saying? Of course. Who wouldn't? But I hope we would say no. Give us more, Jesus. I hope we would want more windows into the Kingdom of Heaven—a lifetime of sacred glimmers that, through our common prayer, we come to recognize as nothing less than the face of God. Glimmers in the lives of those we encounter. Holy glimmers that convince us God is alive in all things. Glimmers that point us toward the Kingdom of God—"the Kingdom is like *this*, like *that* over there, like *that right here* in our hands." Glimmers that overwhelm us, push us on to seek God out more and more, and to daily protest, "No, Jesus, no. Don't listen to the crowd. **Give us more analogies.**"