

The Reign Of God Is Like . . .
Psalm 78:2-4; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The past few weeks we have heard quite a few of Jesus' parables that are included in the gospel of Matthew. And just like the disciples, I also have struggled to understand these veiled parables.

The Gospel of Matthew collects a whole bunch of Jesus' parables just as Matthew does with Jesus' teachings in the "sermon on the mount." (This gathering of parables in chapter 13 is sometimes called "the third discourse." It is the third of the five sets of teachings in Matthew. The five sets are listed as the following: 1. the Sermon on the Mount, 2. the Mission Discourse, 3. the Parabolic Discourse, 4. the Discourse on the Church, and 5. the Discourse on End Times.)

Near the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus explains to the disciples why he uses parables. "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." And he goes on – "This is why I speak to them parables: though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand...But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear."

As mystical as this sounds, it was reassuring to Jesus' disciples then and to his disciples now; Jesus trusts and believes in his followers so much that he is willing to talk to them in this intimate and special way. And yet, the veiled stories / parables that he uses are not always easy to decipher.

There are eight parables in chapter 13, but only two have interpretations that the disciples were bold enough to ask for. However, at the end of the eighth parable, the Parable of the Fishing Net, Jesus asks the disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" and they replied "Yes."!...

Really? Well, I am not convinced. How is it that they need an explanation about weeds and wheat (vs 24-30), and need an interpretation about seeds sown in different kinds of soil (vs 10-23), but they understand the mustard seed (31-33).?? Okay, maybe they are quick learners; it only takes two interpretive exercises for them to understand the method Jesus is using.

In today's Scripture readings, Jesus does not explain any of the parables so we are left to decode them ourselves.

Let's start with the mustard seed. We have grown to revere the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds which develops into a huge plant. But why would someone "sow" a mustard seed in their field?...It is a weed, the biggest of all weeds. It grows so big, so strong, that even birds build nests in it. How can you harvest or plow around that?

Is Jesus trying to get our attention by using something that doesn't fit our understanding? The reign of God is like a weed seed? It looks terribly small, inconsequential, and non-threatening. It grows whether it is wanted or not. If it is not pulled out, it grows so large that it can become a home, a place of refuge!

What about the next parable - the yeast. Soon after this yeast parable, in Matt 16:11b-12, Jesus uses the phrase, "The yeast of the Pharisees". The disciples are confused but Jesus explains that the yeast of the Pharisees is something to be avoided; avoid the teaching of the Pharisees. (Of course, yeast and all leavenings are to be avoided during the Feast of the Passover.)

But here, in this feast of parables, it seems like Jesus is interested in the mysterious power of yeast. How is the reign of God like yeast? A little bit goes a long, long way. Even hidden in 50 pounds or 50 verses of parables, yeast makes itself known. It does its work and becomes food for hundreds. Is it any wonder that Jesus warns against yeast yet celebrates the power of yeast with a gleam in his eye.

The parables are supposed to enlighten the disciples...and enlighten us. They are to bring us in on a secret that until now has been hidden. Jesus uses the parables to help the disciples pay attention to the kingdom of God - the reign of God, that is right there, nearby, and among them. Not in some far off place and time, it is right here among them. It may have small beginnings, but it will grow and it will have a great impact on the world. And Jesus doesn't have just one story in his bag about what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus seems to find the kingdom of God almost everywhere. He tells stories about planting, harvesting, and weeding. And if that isn't in your realm of experience - how about baking, or fishing, or treasure hunting, or buying and selling? Surely, there is an example of the kingdom of God that will resonate with almost every listener.

We could continue on explaining and unpacking each parable. But perhaps it is better to live with the parables, memorize the parables, understand the parables. The parables are to be learned by heart until they begin to unravel and reveal themselves to us...in us. When that happens, then we can tell our own parables of the kingdom of God, with the tools and characters of our own time and place. Then we too will be blessed because we can see and hear the kingdom of God among us...

Jesus says, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

We are invited to be like the teacher of the law - a religious scholar, to bring from the storeroom of our memories the old and the new treasures - stories of the kingdom of God from scripture, memories of the kingdom of God in the past and new glimpses of God's reign among us now.

Where do you see the kingdom of God? How do you see the kingdom of God among us, in your family, in your community, in the world? We can be part of telling the story that

recognizes the kingdom, in the old and in the new, and in this way help to grow God's kingdom now, here on earth.

The reign of God **is** among us. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear the work of God in the old scripture, and in the new living story of God as it unfolds all around us. Amen.