

July 26, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 8
Matt. 13:31-33, 44-52

Jesus told strange stories. Very strange stories, indeed. Thing is, we always try to nicey-nice up our Bibles and we want parables to be just like the definition we learned in catechism: “a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Sort of like Hallmark moments in Jesus’ life. Well, maybe they are. But I like the definition of a parable which C. H. Dodd has offered. He has said that parables are stories which leave, in the hearers’ minds, sufficient doubt about the story’s precise application to tease the mind into active thought.

Another person has said that there is a good rule of thumb about listening to a parable: Identify what is strange about it. When you have identified what is strange about it you have found your window into the kingdom of God.

Take, for instance, the medley of parables offered up in today’s gospel. There’s something a little fishy about each of them. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds, which grew into a tree so that the birds could come make nests in its branches. Nice. Thing is, mustard seeds don’t make trees. Not even in the Holy Lands. Forget all those sermons where you were told they do. Mustard there is the same as mustard here. But in Jesus’ parable the seed grows into something completely different and unexpected. Enough to make one think!

Or – the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure in a field which someone hides and then goes and sells all he has and buys the field. Well, if I were walking through a field and found a bag of gold I might just pick it up and keep on walking. Why buy the field?

Or the merchant in search of fine pearls who finds one of such great value that he sells all that he has and buys it. If I sold our home, car, and dog to give Marilyn a fine pearl necklace I'm not sure she'd think that was such a great thing!

Or, a net thrown into the sea which comes back up with fish of every kind. What's so strange about that? Well, nets usually come back up with one kind of fish. Hmmm. Wonder what's being said there?

What's up with these stories? I'm imaging Jesus on a hillside with a huge crowd in front of him. And he's energized. He is so on fire about the kingdom of God that he is glancing around to see what ordinary thing he can use as examples. He sees a patch of mustard. He immediately makes up a story about that. He spots a field across the lake. He makes up a story about that. There are merchants in his audience. He talks about pearls. There is fisherman on the lake. Boom! The kingdom of God is nets and fish. He used the ordinary to speak of something extraordinary.

Jesus is excited and keyed up to tell his hearers that the realm of God wasn't a place on top of the clouds which good people get to go when they die. He was wound up to tell them that the realm of God was all about them and they could see it in the most run-of-the-mill everyday things.

This is one common thread to Jesus' stories. The people in them are amazed and overwhelmed at the things they encounter. And the things they encounter are extraordinary – something out of the ordinary – something *different* than the normal realm of experience. A mustard *tree*? Wow! A hidden treasure? Fantastic! The mother of all pearls? A net full of diversity? Incredible! This is what the realm of God is Jesus tells them breathlessly. This is what the realm of God is. It's like normal life with a different twist. It is more than "normal." It is the kingdom of God, but it is here. Don't expect things to look the same. It is God's kingdom where mustard seeds grow into trees and people do the unthinkable to have the thing of value.

Can we see the realm of God in the things which are already around us? I'm wondering if one way for us is to envision what Jesus is talking about is to see the realm of God in the literal centerpiece of each story. For instance, can we see the realm of God in seeds and trees? Literal seeds and trees. Can we hold a tiny little mustard seed in our hand and say, "That's the realm of God right there!" Can we look up at a mighty oak with the birds in the branches and see the realm of God? Can we look over a field and see the field, itself, as a treasure? It doesn't need to be "improved" by paving it over or building on it. The field *is* the treasure. Can we look at a pearl and see it as something more than a piece of jewelry to make *us* look good. Can we see the realm of God in all the different species of fish there are in the ocean?

One way to consider these parables might be to put them into contemporary situations. To what shall *we* compare the realm of god? The realm of God is like finding out that the tech stock you bought in the '90's is now twenty times its original value. The realm of God is like that small, shy girl in your congregation who has grown up to become the CEO of the community's leading social service agency. The realm of God is like when more and more people notice your church, begin coming, and find meaning and purpose there. These things all have to do with encountering the unexpected.

Yet ... and yet ... all these things are similes. "The realm of God is *like*." A simile indicates that two things are similar. But they are not each other. Sometimes I get frustrated with similes. I don't want the *virtual* thing. I want the *thing itself*!

Yes, I can understand that the realm of God is like all those things Jesus mentioned in his stories. And I can understand that the realm of God is like contemporary things: stocks, personal growth, church growth. But I don't want the *virtual* realm of God. I want the realm of God *itself*!

One theologian has said that there is a very thin membrane between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth and sometimes, in some places, that

membrane is broken. I like to think the virtual becomes real in worship. Hearing the Word of God isn't *like* receiving grace. It *is* receiving grace. Baptism isn't *like* drowning to sin. It *is* drowning to sin. The bread and wine of communion aren't *like* the body and blood of Christ. They *are* the body and blood of Christ.

But church isn't the only time this thin membrane is punctured. There are other times in life, too, when the realm of God comes rushing in unexpectedly and amazingly. With me, it has happened when people have entered my life – marriage, births of children, close friendships. It has happened with me in times I have been forgiven. It has happened with me early in life when teachers and coaches experienced me – not as the irritating grain of sand that I was – but as the pearl I had the potential to become.

Where does the realm of God come breaking into your life? Can you take the strange things which come your way and find the realm of God in them? Where have the little seeds become big trees? Where have you found diversity in the nets full of people you encounter? You need to keep your eyes and ears open. Otherwise these things might just seem like normal, ordinary things. Find the thing that is different in the everyday things you experience. You just might be experiencing the realm of God.