

Matthew 13:44-52 CEB

<sup>44</sup> “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.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;

<sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

<sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

<sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age.

The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

<sup>52</sup> 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.”

Jesus never really defined the Kingdom of Heaven in concise terms. Instead, he used stories - 7 parables of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13. Two of the stories were later explained – the sower and the farmer and the weeds – but even these can garner many interpretations.

Why did Jesus use so many parables? Most likely it was because one image alone won't connect with everyone who hears. And yet we wonder, what do these parables teach us about the Kingdom?

The first thing these parables teach us is that the Kingdom of Heaven is almost always hidden from plain sight.

That seems like an odd place for Jesus to begin because, if we're honest, most of us expect God to work in dramatic and unmistakable ways, don't we?

We imagine that if God were truly at work there would be fireworks, miraculous displays of power, or unmistakable signs that everyone could recognize. Yet Jesus repeatedly points us in the opposite direction.

He tells us to look for a mustard seed that is so small it could easily be overlooked. He tells us to think about yeast that disappears completely once it has been kneaded into the dough, becoming invisible even though it is quietly transforming every part of the loaf.

He tells us about treasure hidden beneath ordinary soil, an insignificant merchant who buys a pearl concealed among countless others, and a net hidden beneath the surface of the water until it is finally drawn ashore.

Repeatedly, Jesus reminds us that God's Kingdom rarely announces itself with spectacular displays. Instead, God is often doing God's greatest work quietly, patiently, and beneath the surface, long before anyone realizes what is happening.

This is deeply comforting because there are days – even years perhaps when we wonder whether God is doing anything at all. The news! The wars! The arguments and hatred and abject racism and ableism. We experience illness, poverty, depression, grief and we really begin to doubt that God is at work or even is present in all this mess.

The Kingdom of Heaven works underneath and between the cracks. It fills sows itself in tiny cracks and spreads like fungus. Ordinary conversations, acts of forgiveness and mercy, children loved for who they are, communities welcoming the contributions of all abilities, laughter and delight shared with no boundaries... The Kingdom is often hidden...until one day we suddenly realize that the mustard seed has grown into a tree that shelters all sorts of birds and the bread that was kneaded and baked feeds a hungry multitude. God has been at work here all along.

The ordinary field holds a treasure. The bread becomes a lavish feast. The mustard seed grows until all are sheltered. The Kingdom of Heaven begins to work in a modest place. Our faith and actions don't need to be spectacular...just consistent, true and faithful. And that hidden faithfulness changes the world.

God's Kingdom always begins with what appears to be an impossibly small beginning...but these insignificant beginnings are never the end of the story.

The mustard seed is so tiny that no one would ever imagine it becoming a place where birds could build their nests. A small amount of yeast hardly seems capable of feeding an entire village, yet Jesus says that a little yeast eventually works its way through an enormous amount of flour until the whole batch has risen.

Throughout Scripture this is God's pattern. Time after time, God delights in beginning with what everyone else considers too small or insignificant to matter because that is how God demonstrates that the power belongs to God and not to us.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven isn't measured by attendance, number of babies, budgets or buildings. It is measured by faithfulness, mercy, kindness and love. The Kingdom is never proportional. Tiny beginnings often produce astonishing endings. Some of the greatest changes in history started with people who simply chose to be faithful in one small moment.

Jesus is a great storyteller. For him to reach the understanding of as many people as he can, he populates his parables with a variety of people and images.

When asked, "What is the Kingdom like?" he could have talked about kings and armies or the wealthy. Instead, a farmer sows the seeds, a woman bakes the bread, a person – I'm going to refer to him as a farm hand from now on – a farm hand digs in a field, a merchant finds a pearl and fishermen sort the fish.

These are ordinary people who go about their labour every day – often overlooked – definitely under appreciated. Ordinary people and ordinary things – like bread or farm workers. Yet there is a twist – as there always is. Jesus also pushes some cultural and religious buttons.

Women – for example – were inferior to men and women's work was not something that men would have a lot of knowledge about.

Even more surprising is that Jesus compares God's Kingdom to yeast. That might not sound strange to us, but for many Jewish listeners, yeast often symbolized corruption or impurity.

Why does Jesus use this image? Because God's grace often appears in places that religious people don't expect.

Another great image that Jesus uses is the image of the net. It is thrown into the water and dragged across horizontally and fish of every variety –kind and obnoxious, friendly and unfriendly, rich and poor, able and disabled, are all gathered into that net. All fish are gathered and God does the sorting. We're just the people who cast the nets.

Perhaps the shortest parables are also the most powerful. A farm hand discovers buried treasure. A merchant finds one pearl of extraordinary value. Both stories end the same way. The finders sell everything with joy.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not about selling everything you own. It is, instead, about discovering something so beautiful that everything else is suddenly insignificant. When people discover the love of Christ and God's love for the world, then discipleship stops feeling like obligation. Instead, it becomes a delight. Is God's love a treasure or is something else shaping our life? – because everyone serves something. What is our treasure – what is mine? What is yours? Jesus asks us to ponder what is worthy of giving our lives to. What would we die for? And he insists that the Kingdom of God is worth even more.

Every one of Jesus' parables eventually asks one question. Are you all in? Can you be full on in this kingdom? The kingdom rearranges our priorities. For the farm hand who bought the field, everything had changed. When we have welcomed God's love into ourselves, everything is changed. Every part of your life becomes infused with the love of God like yeast in bread and the love of God in you feeds your soul.

It shapes our families, our work, our relationships, and our acts of forgiveness. It informs our calendars, our budgets and our generosity. It influences our politics, our theology and our society. God's Kingdom within us becomes our identity.

Jesus ends with one final image: A scribe trained for the Kingdom is like a homeowner who brings out treasures both old and new.

I love that picture because it describes the church at its best. We treasure what has been handed down but we also discover new treasures. Jesus himself modeled this. A farmer, woman, merchant, weedy mustard, yeast, seed, a farm hand, pearls, fishing net, treasure...He kept translating until people understood.

And perhaps that is our calling too. To keep telling the old story in fresh ways. Not changing the Gospel, but changing the illustrations.

At the end of all these parables Jesus asks his disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" They answer, "Yes." I wonder if they really had. Perhaps they understood only as much as they could at that moment, just as we do, because understanding the Kingdom is not a one-time event but something we grow into.

Like a germinating seed, or blooming yeast

So, what, then, is the Kingdom of Heaven like?

It is hidden...yet quietly transforming the world.

It begins small...yet changes everything.

It gathers all kinds of people...because God's invitation is astonishingly wide.

It is worth more than anything else we could ever possess and it asks for our whole lives...because it gives us true life in return.

And it invites us to keep sharing the old, old story in ways that help others finally see.

May God give us eyes to see the Kingdom already at work among us. And may we have the courage to live this kingdom of God to its fullest.