Sermon for July 26, 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Near the end of our Gospel text for today, Jesus asks the disciples a question: “Have you understood all this?”

They, “Yes,” but it’s easy to imagine that their “yes” really means “maybe a little? But I don’t want to admit I don’t, because I don’t want to be the only one who doesn’t, so…yes?”

Our own difficulties with Jesus’ parables and the stories about the disciples throughout the Gospels offer us plenty of reason to think that maybe they don’t understand what he’s saying as much as their answer suggests.

Jesus frequently used metaphors and stories to explain the Kingdom of Heaven. The trouble with metaphors is that they only work if we understand the thing that’s being used to explain the other thing.

Those of us who took the SAT may remember the analogy section, where they offered multiple choices to fill in a blank. Cat is to Table as Animal is to blank. (They were never that easy.) We had to figure out how words connected in order to get the right answer. But if you didn’t know what a word meant, you didn’t stand much of a chance of getting the answer right.

By offering these 5 parables about common, ordinary things and people, Jesus increased the chances of the disciples understanding what he was talking about.

Mustard grew pretty easily, but it could take over a field if it was left unchecked. It could be hard to understand how something as tiny as a mustard seed could grow into something so big. It’s been suggested that what Jesus is saying here is that kingdom of heaven would grow and offer shelter for some, but others would find it noxious, and try to root it out.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Others have said that it reminds us that size doesn’t matter. From something small, great things can come. Still others have said that it’s a reminder that God works in unexpected and mysterious ways.

Knowing Jesus, it’s entirely possible he meant all those things and still more. Maybe the next parable will help.

In Jesus’ time, you couldn’t go to the store and buy a package of yeast. People took advantage of the naturally occurring yeast in the air. Mix some water and flour together and leave it uncovered, and eventually, the dough will rise. And if you fermented some of the mixture, you’d have a more reliable source of leavening.

For people who had never taken a chemistry class, how a little chunk of fermented dough mixed in with a batch of new dough would produce something that became a raised loaf of bread would have been a mystery.

What we might miss in our modern reading of this parable is the abundance. Three measures of flour equaled about 50 pounds of flour. That makes *a lot* of bread.

This parable reminds us, then, that there’s an abundance inherent in God’s kingdom, something we’ll hear about next week in the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. And the parable reminds us of the transformative nature of God’s kingdom.

Taken together, the parables of the mustard seed and the woman baking bread remind us of the mystery of how God is at work in the world. Through small, seemingly trivial things, easily overlooked things, like a mustard seed or leaven, God produces an abundance of food and shelter.

Then we have the parables about treasures. One man finds a treasure in a field, something another person had hidden. In his joy, he runs to sell everything he has and buys the field. If someone else had hidden the treasure, how did he find it? Was there a visual clue? Had he heard a rumor? We don’t know. But he found it and gave up everything he had so he could buy the field and have that treasure.

The other man, a merchant, was seeking fine pearls. He found an extraordinary one, and sold everything he had to buy it.

What would it have meant to sell *everything* they owned to buy the land or the pearl. Did they sell their homes? All their worldly goods? Everything in the merchant’s shop? That’s what it suggests. And they seem to have done this without hesitation. We’re even told the man who bought the field was full of joy.

Both men, upon finding an unparalleled treasure, sold everything they had. Once they bought the land or the pearl, those were the only things they owned. *There was nothing better they could have.*

That tells us not that the kingdom of heaven is something we can *buy*, but it’s the greatest treasure of all. Their single-mindedness is what we should notice. As disciples, we’re meant to be single-minded in our faith, focused, as Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, on storing up treasures in heaven, not on earth. For where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Finally, we have the fishers. If the disciples had a chance to understand any of these 5 parables, this was probably the one that was a slam dunk for them, since many of them had been fishermen before they began to follow Jesus.

Before they did as the men seeking treasure did, and gave up everything they had to follow Jesus.

The fishermen threw their net in the sea and they caught fish of every kind. Not one or two types of fish. Fish of *every* kind. Trout, bass, salmon, piranha, goldfish, anchovies, herring, cod, tuna, clownfish, pufferfish. You name it, they caught it.

This is simultaneously the easiest to understand but hardest of the 5 parables, because it tells us that God’s kingdom is not exclusive. It is absolutely and utterly inclusive. Fish we don’t like, fish that are weird-looking, fish we think are scary – catfish, pufferfish, piranhas – are every bit as much a part of the catch, every bit as much welcomed by God in the kingdom, as the fish we like, the safe fish, like salmon and tuna and cod.

The fact that this parable is so easy to understand makes it hard for us. As we heard in the parable last week, where a man’s enemies sowed weeds in his field, and the sower says, “Let both the weeds and the wheat grow, and when we harvest, we’ll burn the weeds and gather the wheat into my barn,” this parable challenges our ideas of who God chooses to welcome, who God chooses to love, to whom God chooses to offer salvation, and insists that we don’t get to make those choices, that we don’t get to treat people as being anything other than a beloved child of God.

The staggeringly good news from these parables is the abundant love and mercy of God, and that, even when it seems God is hidden, even when it seems God’s purposes are not being furthered, not growing, they are. When we doubt, when we worry that we’re the weeds and not the wheat, Paul is there to offer us the reassurance that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God for this greatest treasure of all.

1. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark,* pp. 171-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 6:19-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)