

July 30, 2017  
Pentecost 8  
The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like . . .  
1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52  
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I have a confession to make: I am an HGTV junkie! The purpose of the network is to showcase modern design trends. Each series starts with the same premise, someone is looking for the perfect home. The experts listen to the seeker's wish list and go in search of that perfect home. The drama includes disappointment, misunderstanding and frustration, as the seeker is forced to adjust to the reality of what exists within her expectations. The perfect home does not exist. It is easy to describe what the perfect home is like . . . It is not so easy to find it.

It is equally difficult is it to say with certainty what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Jesus continues using parables to help us understand what the kingdom of heaven is like. Today, He explains it in five brief parables. After the two detailed parables about the sower, and seeds and weeds, it is as if someone said to Jesus: "Tell us more about the kingdom of heaven? How would you describe it?" Jesus obliges the crowd by saying

The kingdom of heaven is like . . .

A mustard seed

Yeast in flour

Treasure hidden in a field

A merchant in search of fine pearls

A net thrown into the sea

Each of these short descriptions expands our understanding of God's kingdom, while still leaving us puzzled.

The "smallest of all seeds," the mustard seed can grow into a tree. By emphasizing the size of the seed, we see that even from these modest beginnings the kingdom of heaven is being realized on earth. What is seemingly invisible can have an overwhelming impact. Yet, like the seeds mentioned in the previous parables, the mustard seed, can have a negative impact. In some settings it is considered an invasive, harmful species.

Some of you are fantastic bakers. You understand what yeast does. Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast. Yeast is a key ingredient for making bread. When the right amount is added it causes the dough to rise.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, transformative and uplifting. Without yeast, the bread would be flat and lifeless. It is the presence of God's kingdom that empowers God's people to be transformed and rise above life's circumstances. Yet, while yeast is necessary, too much can ruin the whole batch.

The kingdom of heaven is like hidden treasure that has been found in a field. Imagine walking through the field and finding something of great value. What would you do? Pick up the treasure? Go to the field owner with it? The man that Jesus describes is so filled with joy that he risks everything in order to have more joy. In exchange for the *possibility* of finding more treasure he sells everything he has to obtain the field.

The kingdom of heaven is not simply joy; it is a joy that is worth all that you have. Yet, the euphoria of finding treasure can lead to selfish hoarding of the treasure for one's self, blinding us to the needs of others.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who is searching for a pearl. Again, the finder, ". . . went and sold all that he had and bought it". Like the man who finds a hidden treasure, the merchant who found the pearl sells all that he has to purchase it. The kingdom of heaven is valuable and worth searching for. It is not easily found or readily available. And, the merchant may soon discover there is a market for this valuable pearl, he puts an earthly price on it that only the wealthiest can afford.

Jesus concludes this string of parables saying the kingdom of heaven is like a fishing net. The net "caught fish of every kind". The kingdom of heaven is diverse and inclusive. "When [the net] was full they drew it ashore, [they] sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad". Just as in the parable of the weeds, Jesus says it is the angels who "separate the evil from the righteous".

In the kingdom of God, it is not our job to determine who is in and who is out, yet we easily slip into the role of the angels, judging the worthiness of others and casting them aside.

These five parables have taught us more about the kingdom of heaven. The parables about the sower, the seeds and the weeds would have appealed to the farmers in the crowd, these parables would have made sense to bakers, merchants and fishermen. The variety of images would have moved the crowd to a better understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

What images would help modern listeners understand the treasure and diversity that is the kingdom of heaven? We're going to do something very different: Turn to the person next to you, or behind you and say: The kingdom of heaven is like . . . and fill in the blank.

The kingdom of heaven is like all of these things. And the kingdom of heaven is filled with sinners like you and me;

Sinners who can't tell the difference between wheat and weeds;

Sinners who add too much yeast and spoil the whole batch;

Sinners who forget to share what we have

Sinners who are quick to throw out the bad fish

Sinners who are called to share the good news anyway!  
Because, in the end, The kingdom of God is like a community of believers where all are welcome at the Lord's table. Where all, even the smallest nourished, uplifted, and treasured.

Let everyone with ears, listen!

Thanks be to God!