

Matthew 13:31-33, 45-51

Jesus put before them another parable: “The dominion of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” Jesus told them another parable: “The dominion of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“Again, the dominion of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who finding one pearl of great value, went and sold everything and bought it. “Again, the dominion of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

Recently, the young girl I babysit has begun to learn about riddles, a puzzle not so unlike a parable, a message that depends on the teller and the hearer having a common understanding. Every day she brings a new one home from camp and, more often than not, she delivers her riddle a way that I can't even understand it, much less answer it correctly. She drops a detail or changes the word on which the whole thing hinges. For example, there's a riddle that goes like this: *Once there was a butcher who was 40 years old, 6'2" tall, and had a shoe size of 13. What did he weigh? (Meat!)* Only when my charge told it, she asked me *how much* he weighed rather than *what* and was exasperated when I said “meat” was not an answer to “how much.” So here we have Jesus, speaking in riddles, stories that really make no particular sense. Heaven is like a mustard seed? Are we sure he didn't just drop a word or two?

Matthew tells us that Jesus asked, “Have you understood all this?” and that those around answered, “Yes.” And to that I say, “*REALLY?!?*” When Jesus spoke in parables, some scholars say, it was a sort of code—“let those who have ears hear,” he says—so that he could teach even within earshot of the religious authorities while flying under the radar. Often, the parables were about contradicting the order of things, messages of hope in times of despair, not unlike comparing heaven to yeast. It might have seemed like a badly told riddle to those who were unfamiliar with the style, but those who followed him *could* understand it, because it was meant for them. For us, we find ourselves, centuries later, studying cryptic stories and trying to decipher the messages meant for us.

Still, it seems like the perfect week for a parable, in these days when planes fall from the sky, children cross deserts, the conflict in the Middle East is at a fever pitch. Nothing much is making sense these days. I don’t know about you, but I am overwhelmed. I have logged a lot of hours scrolling through one headline after the next, and then I’ve spent a lot more time doing, literally, nothing: staring at a wall, zoning out watching youtube videos of baby hedgehogs being tickled (this one I recommend—that hedgehog is super cute!). I have wanted to pull the covers over my head. How can I get up, make coffee, walk the dog, when

there is such great suffering in the world? How can I reckon with my place in the order of things?

Paralysis is one response, and the other response is to try to do EVERYTHING. Give to organizations, volunteer all of my time, post every article on every subject to Facebook, inundating my friends' newsfeeds with all the very important information *I* think *they* need to know to understand how I see things, hoping to inspire them to join in the action. Speaking for myself, I feel alternately small and helpless and then powerful and capable of anything.

In his parables, Jesus compares the realm of God to four seemingly disparate objects: a mustard seed, yeast, a pearl, a fishing net. Surely, Jesus chose these comparisons intentionally. What do these things have in common? Since it's something like a puzzle, let's examine our options. They're all small, and that certainly speaks to the sense of smallness I've been experiencing. A tiny mustard seed grows into a viney shrub in which the birds can nest; it's a lovely thought. But a fishing net is not so small. Hm. They are all mundane objects...well, not exactly—a pearl for which a merchant is willing to sell everything he owns is hardly mundane. What if the thing they have in common is that their action, their value as metaphors, is coupled with the action of a person. Each of these objects requires some human action to actualize their potential. And each of the nameless characters have vocations that

utilize these objects and have knowledge of how to help each object in turn reach its full potential.

So how does this help us make ultimate meaning, move toward the heart of God, or even begin to repair our deeply broken world? The answer might be in that balance between feeling insignificant and feeling empowered. In an essay called “The Small Work in the Great Work,” one of many essays compiled in a book called *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, Victoria Stafford invites us, in moments of great suffering, to see within that Great Work of repairing the whole wide world, the “living and breathing reminders of what the small work in the Great Work might reasonably, unreasonably, look like.” While Jesus asks listeners to imagine a reality far different from the one presented, I think this is he is also calling us to be extraordinary in our ordinariness.

To be right sized, to take on the work that is ours to do—that is how we can bring about lasting change. The mustard seed does the thing it knows to do, and the sower does the thing that she knows to do, too. It’s not enough to drop seeds into the ground, as our gardeners will tell you. You have to know about the soil, the water source, the climate, the balance of sun and shade—you have to know when is the time to plant in order for a seed to thrive.// The yeast is going to lighten the dough, but the baker knows how to knead it, how to bake it at what temperature and for how long.// A pearl is locked in a shell until someone frees it and polishes it.// A net is just a pile of rope until the

fisherman throws it into the water to see what he can catch. We have innate talents and we cultivate our passions—our small work in the Great Work. When I feel too small OR too powerful, it's usually because I forget that God is God and I am not. Once I remember that, I can more easily find my place in the order of things, remember that God is always calling me to co-create something new, to plant a seed of Love and tend it faithfully, according to my gifts, passions, and willingness. To cast Love's net wide and wonder at the abundance of life found within. We cannot do everything, but we can utilize the resources at our disposal and our talents as we feel called. That is moving to the heart of God. That is how we can repair the world.

It's a bit of a riddle and a bit of a mystery, the realm of God, a parable unto itself. Some folks talk about the kin-dom using the phrase, "already but not yet," meaning that there is something of God's kin-dom already available to us, though it is not the perfect reality that it will someday be. For some, it's a far-off day when we have finally built the beloved community. For others, it's a heavenly feast somewhere, someday, in the life eternal. It is, indeed, like mustard seed—it does what it does and grows as it will, but it also requires us to help it along, so it will reach fruition. What I like about the "already but not yet" idea is that it offers us an opportunity to see God's work in the world while listening for where we are each being called to build the beloved community, to work for the kin-dom. Despite being caught between the extremes of doing nothing and doing everything, bringing about the

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realm of God isn't just about small work or big work. It's about following Spirit's leading. It's about doing the work that is ours to do, whether we are the sower, the baker, the merchant, or the fisher—or even the fish! I don't know what or where the kingdom of heaven will be in the hereafter, but I know where it is now: it's already growing in each of us, wily like a mustard seed, kneaded together like yeast in rising dough, precious as a pearl, and teeming with abundant life like a well-used net. I see it in children at play, in a group of people singing, in our garden, in a shared meal at a table. We repair the world by trusting Spirit's leading, doing what is ours to do, exploring and unlocking the potential of our right-sized, gifted, God-kissed selves. I don't know how we are going to get to the day where we truly have created the beloved community. What I do know is that we are going to keep putting one foot in front of the other, planting seeds of Love and watching it grow into a nesting place, kneading yeast into dough to be shared at Love's table, seeking the heart of God like a merchant seeks a pearl of great value, and casting a wide net of Love. Amen.