

We have a series of parables about the Kingdom of God in this morning’s gospel reading. Each parable deserves a sermon unto it’s own, but I will try to bring out some common themes from among them. In these parables Jesus is teaching something new about God and the way He works. What is Jesus telling us?

This sermon, by the way, has a little different tack – I’m going to stay close to the text before us and use Jesus’ own illustrations as my main source of illumination. I figure His illustrations are a whole lot better than mine, anyway! After all, it is His Kingdom.

Jesus compares God’s Kingdom to a tiny seed sown in a field, a little bit of yeast mixed into a huge vat of flour, treasure hidden away underground, a merchant on wild hunt for one diminutive but incredibly valuable pearl, and a fishing net thrown into the vastness of the sea.

What happens in each of these brilliant and compact short stories of Jesus? The tiny seed becomes the greatest of shrubs – verily a tree! – and gives shade for every bird of the air.

The inconsequential yeast works its magic and leavens the whole loaf – using the measurements that Jesus gives, that’s over 101 pounds of dough!

The treasure is dug up and then hidden again; the lucky guy that finds the treasure sells his every earthly possession to buy the plot of earth in which he’s hidden his treasure.

The merchant finally finds the pearl of great price, which accordingly comes with a great price – so great that the merchant, too, sells all his earthly possessions so he could possess this one tiny piece of jewelry.

And the net, when flung into the randomness of the sea, drags in every kind of sea life, not to mention the assorted flotsam and jetsam one finds on a ocean floor, up onto the beach to be sorted out.

To draw out the meaning in Jesus’ parables, I’m going to take my exegetical clues from my favorite Bible scholar. He’s an Episcopal priest – now in his 80’s –

named Robert Capon. If you are looking for a little help interpreting the Bible and at the same time want a rollicking, brilliant, and astonishingly good read, then pick up *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment* – Capon’s theological magnum opus.

Drawing on Matthew 13, our lectionary chapter this morning, Capon describes God’s Kingdom as both catholic yet hidden, a Kingdom that encounters hostility and resistance, yet asks for a response of joyous acceptance. There is so much to say about each parable and about each of these descriptions, yet today I’ll only be able to give a general overview. This sermon may spawn more questions than answers, but such is the nature of teaching in parables.

Let’s start with “catholic”. By catholicity, we do not mean Roman Catholic, but catholicity as the insistence that God’s Kingdom is at work “*everywhere, always, and for all, rather than in some places, at some times, and for some people.*” Like we used to say about Elvis, He’s everywhere. The “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” is to be a sign of God’s Kingdom at work “at all times and in all places”, as we say in the Nicene Creed and the Rite One Communion prayer.

Many of us have the mistaken notion that God is at work only in some places. God will not be contained. The other day our friend Paige was walking down Rugby Road and saw a lady in her yard with two goats – on leashes! The lady, I presume, was trying to mow her yard with 2 leashed goats. You don’t put goats on leashes! You turn goats loose and they consume anything and everything. You can’t put a leash on God. He is everywhere and anywhere, at all times and in all places.

This should serve as an enormous comfort. There is no place in the world, there is no situation in your life that is bereft of God’s presence. Jesus illustrates this by the seed that becomes a tree for all the birds of the air, a hundred pound loaf that represents the whole enchilada of the world, the field of the world in which the treasure of his Kingdom is hidden, the dragnet that turns up every kind of sea creature imaginable – the good, the bad, and the ugly, - from speckled trout to blow toad.

If this is true, then it naturally begs the question – why can’t we, why don’t we see God at work everywhere, anywhere, and especially in this situation in my life? Well, God’s Kingdom is catholic, but it is also hidden. His work is not obvious and run of the mill. The majority of God’s work is unseen, underground, counter intuitive, paradoxical.

All Jesus' parables end with an obvious, clear as day manifestation of His presence – a big tree, enough bread to fill a bakery, every kind of fish flapping on the open beach. But those endings represent the end of the world, the finished product when God will right every last wrong, when sinners will mercifully be done with sin and be ready to sit down at God's Feast of Grace. I'll say a little more about this in a second when we talk about our response to God's Kingdom.

But, for now, for when and where we live in this world – the already but not yet, God's work is mostly hidden. This is why Jesus compares the Kingdom to a tiny seed, a hidden and buried treasure, one pearl among millions, like the golden ticket in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

God's hidden work should also be of enormous comfort to us who suffer the slings and arrows of life. Martin Luther called God's work "*sub contrario*" – identified under the opposite sign. This means that in the very place you feel God is absent – your ongoing pain, the irresolvable problem, the proverbial Brick Wall, is the very place that the mustard seed is beginning to sprout, the loaf is beginning to bake, the pearl is that much closer to discovery, the net is scooping yet another species of sea life into its gracious grasp.

We, of course, would like God to be much clearer in His ways – skywriting would be fine, or even a direct email from Him would suffice. Not to mention, this problem solved and that one put behind us. But Isaiah says it as clearly as a message in the sky – “*‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways,’ declares the Lord.*” This is why we talk about God “revealing Himself” to us. (A friend who was going prematurely bald, liked to say that God was revealing his forehead to him.) For now, most of God's Kingdom is still unrevealed. God's Kingdom is catholic, but for now, it is also hidden.

The fact that God's work is primarily hidden elicits a general response of hostility from us. We want things on our own terms. This is the essence of sin. We resent that God's thoughts are not our thoughts – or better yet that our thoughts aren't exactly God's thoughts. Everybody wants to rule the world, or at least our own world. That is the hostile response of sin. Sticking with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the response of sin is “I want an Oompa-Loompah now!”

The response of faith to the Kingdom is simply described, though not simply enacted - trust. Trust in God. Trust in Jesus. Jesus makes clear that the primary work of God's Kingdom is one of grace and forgiveness. Jesus said that when He

was lifted up on the cross He would draw ALL the world to himself – the entire field, every last drop of the sea, the whole loaf.

He has forgiven the world of its sin, even its hostile response of sin. He has forgiven you for all that is bad about you and for self-righteous pride in all that is good about you. You, in fact, are the pearl of great price that He has searched out and found. You are the treasure hidden away in a field that He has sold everything for in order to make his own. In the words of a different scripture, you are bought with a great price – the price of his own blood, shed from a cross upon He was lifted to bring all the world to Himself.

You are the pearl of great price that God Himself has made His own – with no reference whatsoever to your questionable track record. All the roads in God's Kingdom, both catholic and hidden, lead to forgiveness, all records of good and bad thrown into the sea to be scooped up by the net of grace.

With news like that, why on earth - or better yet, why in hell would you want to persist on you own merit? With news like that, why in heaven's name, wouldn't you want to give up everything you call your own and trust in the God who loves you? Amen.