

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52 "When the Hidden Becomes Visible" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/30/17

One of the first stories I ever heard about our church yard sales that eventually transformed into our Thrift Store, revolved around items donated by Bill & George, a couple in the church many years ago, after their death. It seems that Bill and George, both very ill from smoking related diseases, donated everything they owned to our church. As Julie Walker was sorting through some of the things, she happened to bump against an air freshener unit used in the homes of heavy smokers which tipped over and out fell a thin wallet. She opened it up and inside were several bills. She quickly tapped Dianne Burrell and said. "Come here, you need to see this." Dianne responded no, she was busy, to which Julie said, in that tone of voice that we have all come to understand as she means business, "Get over here," and Julie opened up the wallet again to reveal 40 \$100 bills hidden inside. Bill and George had mentioned they had hidden some money somewhere for the church but they couldn't remember where. That money not only benefitted the ministry of our church, but also the LGBTQ community, when it wasn't considered acceptable to support such things. I was thinking about this story as I sat on a rock at Crystal Creek Falls watching Ivy's boyfriend Josh teach my Northwest Christian College friends how to gold pan this past week. Something pinged on his metal detector and it said it was gold, several inches deep. They kept digging and digging until it started growing dark, and we had to head out. But I guarantee Josh will be back to that spot to search again. Hidden treasures are all around us, just waiting to be found, waiting to be revealed.

Jesus understood the truth of this statement better than most. The hidden treasures he knew about were the ones that neither rust nor moth could destroy, but would last forever. These treasures are connected to what is most important in life, to our beliefs about God and

God's realm. But how do we talk about those beliefs? Someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do, and there are no words that are true enough, right enough, big enough to explain. You rummage around for something to say, but everything sounds either too vague or too pious. You could talk about how your heart feels full to bursting sometimes, or about the mysterious sense of kinship you feel with other human beings. You could talk about how even the worst things that happen to you seem to have a blessing hidden in them somewhere, but the truth is it is incredibly hard to speak directly about holy things. How can our limited language capture the unlimited reality of God's realm? How can words describe that which is beyond all words?

Jesus chose to use metaphors, talking about one thing by referring to another. In our text today, we are presented with one comparison after another using this hidden to visible pattern Matthew does so well. Sometimes, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, the comparisons are comfortable and familiar like "her eyes are as blue as the sky." But other times, the comparisons are jarring or startling, "her eyes were as blue as a bruise." When the comparisons catch us by surprise, that is when they make us think, that is when our everyday understanding of things is broken open and we are invited to explore them all over again, to go inside of them and see what is new. Jesus did this all the time. "The kingdom of heaven is like this..." he would say, telling his followers stories about sheep and shepherds, brides and grooms, wheat and weeds. In the reading today, he launches a volley of such comparisons. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like buried treasure, like a fine pearl, like a net cast into the sea. The images come quickly, one right after another, with no preparation, no explanation, no time for questions and answers. He seems to be in some kind

of rush as he tosses these images out or maybe Matthew is in a rush to get them recorded. He is usually a better storyteller than that, gathering his listeners around him and sliding into his tale with one of those time-honored introductions like “Once upon a time, there was a landowner...” or “There once was a king...” When he does this, his followers settle down to listen, knowing that the story will be full of meaning for them, knowing that they had better listen well.

However, these 5 flashes of God’s realm come at us so quickly that there is no time to settle down at all. Jesus zings us with one, two, three, four, five – like snapshots, like scenes glimpsed thru the windows of a fast-moving train. The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this, he says. It is almost like he doesn’t want us to think too much about them. Don’t get stuck on any one of them, but instead allow yourself to be dazzled by the number and variety of things the realm of God is like. It is like this and this and this... There have been times in my ministry where I have focused on just one of them in a message, but this morning I am struck by the myriad and variety – like a treasure of cash found in an air freshener unit, once used to clear the air of death-dealing smoke... or gold found by relative strangers who are now united by a common goal. Jesus’ first 2 comparisons seem easy enough – a mustard seed and a handful of yeast -nothing much to look at, not very impressive at all, at least not at first. Until we realize, however, as David Lose notes, that neither mustard seed nor yeast were viewed positively in Jesus’ world. Mustard was a weed, dreaded by farmers the way today’s gardeners dread crabgrass. It starts out small, but before long it has taken over your entire field. Similarly, yeast was a contaminant and almost always represents the nature of sin when mentioned in the Bible. The amount of yeast mentioned is enough for 128 cups worth. That

equals 16 five pound bags. so when you put 42 or so cups of water in, you have got a little over 101 pounds of dough in your hands. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and leavened a truckload of dough, enough to feed a family for several months. If the realm of God is like that, then it is surprising, and powerful, and more than meets the eye.

The next metaphors are a bit more difficult. Each man finds something of great value and sells all that he has to make it his own. Each finds something that makes everything else he owns trivial by comparison and he does not think twice about trading it all in. If God's realm is like that, then it is rare but attainable, for those who are not only willing but eager to embrace it. The last comparison, the fishing net, takes a different approach altogether. Like the wheat and weeds from last week, the net gathers fish of every kind, good and bad, which are sorted out once the net is full. If the realm of God is like that, then it is not, in the end, something we find but something that finds us and hauls us into the light. It is a wallet of cash that gets found at just the right moment... it is a nugget of gold that uncovers itself when the timing is right. It is a lot to digest in one sitting, but the striking thing about all these images is their essential hiddenness. If God's realm is like these, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye, but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface waiting to be discovered and claimed.

It is the stuff legends are made of, tantalizing the human imagination as we let ourselves dream what it would be like to uncover, to make visible, such buried treasure. Whether it begins as a seed hidden in the ground or a treasure hidden in a field, the kingdom comes when it is no longer hidden but revealed, when the tree is full grown, when the treasure chest is opened, when what was lost is found, and what was secret is known, and what was hidden

away is brought forth for everyone to see. It is exciting business, but where do we begin if we have no kingdom detector? Jesus seems to teach us that God has hidden the realm of God, not in extraordinary places where treasure hunters might seek, but in the last place any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. Like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless steel, like a diamond necklace stuck in with the rhinestones; the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, God's realm mixed in with the ho-hum lazy summer days, as easy to find as an amaryllis bulb in the dark basement that suddenly sends forth a shoot, or a child's smile when she wakes up from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long period of dry, hot weather.

If we want to speak of the realm of God, of our belief in what is unspeakable, then we begin with words we know, such as field, bird, man, woman, bread, air fresheners, yard sales, clear creeks, friends – these are the places to dig for the kingdom of heaven; these are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. If we can't find them here, we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having.