

As wonderful as it is, few people would cite Matthew 13 as a favorite chapter of the Bible. It is not read at weddings or funerals or during hospital visits. You will not find it embroidered on wall hangings. It is an easy chapter to skim over. No hard-to-pronounce names or hefty theological themes. Just an array of common objects--seed, yeast, pearls, treasure, fishing net--that Jesus uses to describe what is priceless beyond measure.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," he says, "or a handful of yeast." "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, or a merchant in search of fine pearls..." A surprising comparison between the sacred and the ordinary. Students here may know that describing one thing by comparing it to another is called...simile, often using "like" or "as.." Her eyes are as blue as the sky. Your voice to me is like fingernails on a blackboard. It was raining so hard it was like...a curtain of water.

Jesus often taught in this manner. Using the ordinary to describe the extraordinary. "The word of God is like seed scattered in a field," he says. "Wayward people are like sheep without a shepherd. God is like the owner of a vineyard. Heaven rejoices over one sinner found just like a woman rejoices when she finds her lost coin."

Today Jesus gives us five parables back to back to back, five snapshots of how God works. They come so quickly we scarcely have time to ponder. "The kingdom of heaven is like this," Jesus says, "and like this, and this..." Almost as though he does not want us to dwell too long on any one image, but be dazzled by the variety of things the kingdom of heaven is like.

But pause here. What exactly does that mean—"The kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God"? The term is interchangeable. It is one of those holy terms we feel we should know. We hear the term enough. We know it is important. During seminary, my New Testament Professor stressed to his classroom, "Every sermon MUST mention the kingdom." I did not know what he meant. So as I worked on assignments or sermons, about twice every page where it seemed appropriate, I inserted the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven." Could I bluff my way through? Those papers were returned with my kingdom references circled in red and big question marks: "What do you mean?" or "I don't get it." C+

In each of these parable Jesus' focus is upon the kingdom of heaven as something extremely desirable, priceless beyond measure. The kingdom is like a mustard seed, or yeast, a pearl, a treasure, a fishing net. Kingdom describes not a place or a location, but a condition:

The kingdom of heaven is the peace you realize when life becomes unraveled.

The kingdom is the confidence of knowing that earthly goodbyes are not the final word, that believers will re-unite in heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is knowing that God is in control even of the bleakest of circumstances, and that he will never leave or forsake us. During this long pandemic I learned a

new term—"awfulizing"—where people imagine the worst-case scenario and dwell on it far too much: "What if...this happens, or this," and you allow it to play out. If we are not careful, our minds can lead us into all sorts of dark places. Kingdom of heaven is the bedrock assurance that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, not height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8—powerful and profound and priceless beyond measure. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," Jesus said, "and his righteousness. And all these things shall be given to you."

In these parables Jesus is speaking to his disciples, to the church, to us--a reminder that for all our unimpressiveness the church is God's chosen instrument for working out his purposes in the world, for drawing people into the kingdom and carrying out kingdom work.

Quick glances: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, about the size of the head of a pin. Individually, pretty inconsequential. Yet plant it and it grows, large enough for fat sparrows to build a nest. Amazing. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

Or the kingdom is like yeast a woman mixing in with the flour. It sounds like cooking instruction. But the woman hides the yeast in the dough. In the end, you do not see the yeast, but you see the effect. Without yeast, you would have only bricks of heavy bread. Notice though—the woman mixes the yeast with "three measures" of flour—roughly fifty pounds, enough to feed a small army.

Both seed and yeast begin small, just as Jesus' truths begin with one man preaching in a remote corner of the world. From unremarkable beginnings come unimaginable endings, and the power to transform all that surrounds it.

The treasure seeker and the pearl merchant are similar in that each discover something so precious that they sell everything in order to possess it. But this treasure-finder stumbles across this great find in the field. He is not looking for it; the treasure is a dazzling, unexpected event. The pearl merchant, though, is a seeker, and finds exactly what he has been searching for.

So it is with God's kingdom. Some people are on a quest, hungering for meaning and purpose--reading widely, asking questions, and they are captivated, drawn in by the depths of the gospel. Others are simply going about routine--cooking or daydreaming or filing papers, or half-listening to a sermon. But a word breaks through, or an experience catches them off guard, and all of a sudden God seems nearer than ever before. Life takes on a deeper degree of holiness.

Here is Kingdom experience for my wife Mary & I from 4th of July weekend, 2008—12 summers ago, but still fresh. For some reason, our answering machine at home was not working. Not a huge deal...except that Gordon College in Massachusetts, where our daughter Sarah was

working that summer, was trying to reach us to inform us that Sarah had been in an accident. Evidently the college did not have our cell numbers, only our home phone. Finally they reached our emergency contact person--an out of state relative--who phoned Mary and I with word that Sarah had been injured and that the college was trying to contact us.

A good ending to this story, I will tell you that now. But this being the day before 4th of July, when we phoned the Gordon campus, all we got were answering machines. Staff had begun their long weekend. We realized our absolute dependence upon God, and stumbled our way through pleading prayer. For forty-five minutes we had no idea. This is as scared as we have ever been. Why on this day of all days was our home answering machine malfunctioning?

The good ending: Sarah, rugged outdoorswoman that she is, was on a rock-climbing expedition with the day camp where she is working. A storm moved in quickly, and Sarah and the other two leaders rushed all the kids to safety. But going back to retrieve their ropes and gear, a lightning strike 30 feet away threw them into the air, leaving them stunned, in shock, but alive. All three were taken to the hospital, Sarah strapped on a stretcher. Five hours later all were discharged.

For a stretch all we had to grasp was the peace of God that passes all understanding. We clutched it tightly. But what if the outcome had been different...? Some of you know the heart-wrenching experiences where the outcome is not what you prayed for? I do like to think that our faith would hold secure. But to know God's presence, to remind ourselves over and again that God is in control, to know that nothing enters our lives without God's knowledge...that is kingdom living. It is not necessarily easy, but it is priceless. Jesus Christ says that it is of surpassing value, and that kingdom surrounds us.

As for the parable of the fishing net, this is a word to the church. The fisherman casts a net, and all sorts of fish are gathered up--delicious along with the inedible. The fisherman does not hesitate; he casts wide and deep. The sorting out of good from bad happens later.

So it is with the church. The doors are thrown open, and the net is cast. Into the church come those who are serious about the things of God, hungry to give of themselves and to learn. Others come for any number of reasons: they are curious or pressured or bored. It does not matter. Anyone is welcome. There is no telling what God will do, or what truths take hold. That is one of the delightful mysteries of our faith: Even when it appears that not much is happening, God's Spirit is penetrating quietly, steadily, like a seek growing. The task of sifting the serious from the frivolous is not our business. It is left to God. In the meantime, the message of Christ is proclaimed and God's grace flows freely.

All these-- fishing net, pearl merchant, treasure-seeker, yeast, seed—are like the kingdom of God—the sacred mixed in with the humdrum of everyday life. “Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks his disciples. It is a probing question: Do these truths affect the way you

think and act, how you respond? They answer, "Yes." Kingdom living. Priceless beyond measure. Keep your eyes and your heart open to the wonder of God always around, above, beneath and within us. Amen.