

Okay. Now what should we do?

Pentecost 12A, July 24, 2011

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

When I was in graduate school in the late 1990's, at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, I was preparing for a career as a marriage and family therapist. We studied all the theories and techniques of the trade—structural family therapy, differentiation, triangulation, homeostasis, undifferentiated family ego mass—you know, the greatest hits of mid-20th-century systems theory. But one of our more clever professors wanted us to learn about family *culture*, about the artifacts and rituals and oddball characteristics that tell you what a family is, and who you are. What is a family? What makes a family distinctive, unique? Who are you? And how does who you are stem from your family of origin?

Our professor chose a wonderful example from her own family. She was trying to explain to us where she got her work ethic, her can-do enthusiasm, and her sharp, smart practicality. "I know!" she said. "Here's where I got it." And she described to us a long Saturday she spent with her grandmother canning hundreds of jars of jam and preserves. They gathered all the fruit, washed it, crushed it, mixed it with sugar, pectin and other ingredients, distributed it into hundreds of sanitized jars, sealed the jars, and then undertook the immense task of cleaning everything up. Most of the day was gone when they finished, and there they were, grandmother and granddaughter, gazing at a beautiful field of jars in the middle of a clean kitchen. And then her grandmother said, "Okay. So now what should we do?"

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure...which someone found and hid..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls..."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea..."

Today we hear Jesus in Matthew's Gospel giving us more images and metaphors than we can handle, one after another, and all of them giving us glimpses of the kingdom of heaven that look a lot more like two women making strawberry jam than like a dramatic political victory or an apocalyptic triumph over evil. Sowing seed, kneading bread, burying valuables in a field, shopping for the best jewel, sorting through the day's catch of fish—these are the daily activities of the farmers, merchants, and fishermen who surrounded Jesus, and Jesus sounds like a great storyteller in their midst, using images from their daily lives to make some surprising points about the kingdom. It's as if he's canning jars of jam with his grandmother, and starts talking while she's carefully filling the jars with her sweet concoctions: the kingdom of heaven is like *this*.

But there's more. These are parables, and parables always point in more than one direction. Jesus is not simply painting a homespun portrait of the kingdom as a snug, secure town of earnest farmers and merchants and fishermen, happily going about their activities. That itself is radical enough, at least for the followers of Jesus who were expecting something much more impressive, something like, say, the thrilling overthrow of the government and the arrival of the Messiah in glittering triumph. But if we explore these images a little more deeply, we find some surprising things:

The kingdom of heaven is like someone sowing a mustard seed? Really? The mustard plant is noteworthy for its ordinariness, much closer to a weed than a tea rose: and in Jesus' telling the mustard plant attracts other life in the form of birds nesting in its branches. A weed moving through the landscape in any direction, wild, attracting life to itself. The kingdom of heaven is like *this*?

And...the kingdom of heaven is like yeast being mixed with three measures of flour (which, by the way, is a *huge* amount of flour)? Really? Thomas Keating, the Trappist monk who was one of the creators of the method of centering prayer, talks about yeast in the time of Jesus: it wasn't the clean, fine powder we purchase today in little paper envelopes. It was a messy, stinky mass, teeming with life but really not something you want to deal with unless you have to. So...the kingdom of heaven is a stinky slop of reproductive life, more than a little off-putting, not something intended for polite company. And it was John Dominic Crossan who wondered about the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. If the person who found the treasure had the right of ownership of the treasure, then why did he hide it in a field? And if he *didn't* have the right of ownership, then his behavior was unjust: he craftily manipulated the situation so that he could, well, steal the treasure. And the kingdom of heaven is like *this*? Yes, it sometimes is: we sometimes mishandle or hoard the gifts of life. And like both the treasure-seeker and the merchant shopping for fine pearls, we will sometimes risk *everything*—sell everything we have, which in Jesus' day was to court disaster—to possess something it would be better for us to share.

So...these are not just idyllic images of life in God's kingdom. The pearl-buying merchant and the person who buried the treasure might have meant well at first, but their stories can also be read as cautionary tales, and the seemingly wholesome and harmless images of mustard seeds and yeast reveal the wildness and messiness of life in the kingdom. And into all of these odd images I'd like to add one more, a little parable of my own. I myself don't know its full meaning, so I'll leave that to you, dear listener! It is taken from my work as a therapist many years ago, when a young client of mine came to one of her sessions bearing a gift for me. It was a glass ornament she made in her glass-blowing class. It was perfectly round, and flowing with lovely color. She made no comment about why she gave it to me, and presented her typical blasé attitude as she handed over the boxed gift. Later, after she left my office and went to the car, her mother held back and said quietly to me, "You wouldn't believe how excited she was to give you that ornament. It's all she talked about on the way here."

Now, this was a pretty tough kid, who engaged in many dangerous and frightening behaviors—a thrill-seeking, risk-taking, parent's-worst-nightmare kind of kid. I often felt that our counseling sessions didn't offer her all that much, with me sitting there in my Nordstrom slacks and jotting interventions into my little notepad. But, here it is, here's the parable: the kingdom of heaven is like a troubled teenager who blew a glass ornament and gave it to her therapist, who knew not why.

What does this mean? Of course it can mean something as simple as affection and thanksgiving: like the woman skillfully incorporating yeast into her immense bowl of flour, or the grandmother canning a sea of jam jars, my client is using her skill to express love, connection, appreciation...because she can't directly express it in words.

Except our relationship didn't change after this, and in some ways deteriorated, and this young woman continued to struggle in her relationships with, well, almost everyone. Like the person who buried his treasure in a field, my client gave me a treasure but was not necessarily an ethical, exemplary person, and didn't behave consistently, or behave well, most of the time. And like the merchant of fine pearls, my client often courted disaster in her attempt to seize and control the things she valued. Like the wild mustard plant, my client was not predictable, controllable, or safe.

And, like that mustard plant, my client attracted life. She certainly commanded my attention. I treasure her gift even now, not because I understand what it means—it's nothing like, say, my wedding ring, an object whose meaning is much more clear in my mind and heart—but I treasure it because it symbolizes, for me, the wildness of life, the crazy and messy *weirdness* of being in relationship with somebody else.

And that, friends, is the kingdom of heaven. Nothing tidy or easy to understand, no image or parable that has just one meaning, but the messy, wild *weirdness* of life in community. "Have you understood all this?" Jesus asked his friends. "Yes," they said, and how couldn't they, having contended daily with weeds and yeast and treasures and fishes and all the ambivalence and wildness of their own hearts. Right here, in this messy, out-of-control community, we see God's kingdom beginning to flourish. And so I close with the question asked by the grandmother of my grad-school professor: now that we're here and have already spent the day contending with the mess and muck and sweetness and tartness and beauty of life, well...

Okay. Now what should we do?

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Works consulted:

Gerard S. Sloyan, *Preaching from the Lectionary: An Exegetical Commentary*

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John Forman, personal communication

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