

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52: More Kingdom of Heaven Insight

Introduction:

Friends! We've heard a couple of parables from Jesus the past couple of weeks; today we hear five more of these metaphors that are meant to give those of us who want to understand what Jesus is saying, understanding about the Kingdom of Heaven he's inaugurating on earth.

I like to imagine, and there's no good reason not to, so, that Jesus is telling these things as he's walking along. He sees a mustard tree, takes some steps, sees a lady making some bread, does a 180, and a field laborer passes him, a merchant right after, he glances over by the docks and some fishermen have just returned.

And so he goes. Even if he didn't see this as it was going down, everyone around him as seen it, a thousand times. Jesus is drawing on real life stuff to communicate insight about what it's like when God's power is at play in the world, and his reign is being re-established as people trust Jesus and follow his way of faithfulness.

I want to walk through these metaphors--and they are metaphors, as every parable is. These aren't great complex stories, they're simple. Maybe not so simple to understand, but I think most of us, if we were backed against a wall, could flesh them out without too much effort.

Let's pray that as we walk through the five metaphors Jesus gives for the Kingdom of Heaven, that we get some of the insight he's trying to offer the crowd around him, and us,

too.

Prayer:

Two Metaphors: Mustard Seed

31 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

So. The first metaphor. Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed.

Mustard seeds were small. You know that, right? Tiny little things, mustard seeds.

But they grew, and left alone could become a plant as high as nine feet tall.

It's a very, very small thing that becomes large; and once large, it provides a resting place for those that just a few chapters ago, Jesus used to remind us that God cares for us.

But Jesus doesn't feel like he's made his point, apparently, so he goes for it again. Or, he's like me, and figures, “If one metaphor is good, multiple metaphors are better.” And they are best when they are strung together!

Two Metaphors: Yeast

33 He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds[b] of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

It's like yeast. Yeast, of course, is alive in a way a seed isn't. It's an organism, but one of the simplest.

And Yeast does one thing really, really well; it makes more of itself. It multiplies. And as it multiplies, it ferments whatever sugars it can grab, it releases carbon dioxide, and when you put even the smallest bit of it in dough, if you wait long enough, it will spread itself out and inflate the dough with tons of little bubbles. You know this. You're bread crazy.

Yeast is a tiny thing; tinier even than that mustard seed, but once added to flour--and maybe a little salt & water with it--yeast works its way through an entire batch of dough, expanding the dough as it goes. And the dough goes on to be baked, and we go on to eat it.

Two Metaphors: Commonalities:

What's common to each of these metaphors?

The image that Jesus uses is a small thing. Mustard seeds and yeast are tiny things; we can barely see them.

And they work in ways that seem like magic. That is, we can describe how yeast works to metabolize sugar into carbon dioxide and multiply its cells through replication and transcription. We can describe the biological path that cell-

division and differentiation take, so that a seed grows into a plant.

But, in the last analysis, all we can do is explain these things, really. And explaining something, while fantastic and important, doesn't mean we can replicate it. We can't create life, even with all our attempts and even some really clever mimicry of it.

And these little things that work in ways we don't quite understand end up having huge influence; they go from small to large, and end up fruitful for whoever needs rest or needs fed.

Metaphors: Summary

This is what the Kingdom of God is like, Jesus says.

It's best seen in something small. It ends up having great impact. And even though we can describe what's going on when it shows up, our best posture toward it is to pay attention, notice, maybe study, but gratefully appreciate it as the miracle it is, and appreciate the way it sustains life.

These two metaphors match each other; so do the next two!

Two More Metaphors: Treasure

Jesus says,

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."

We can be distracted here by things that I don't think Jesus wants us to focus on. "Would it be appropriate for a Christian to not disclose that there's a treasure chest in the field before he or she buys it? Is that ethical?" That's not where Jesus wants us to go with this. He wants us to see that the discovery the man made filled him with joy, and he liquidated all he had, made an extreme, financial investment in the treasure he wanted. We don't know much about this man; he might be a field worker, a laborer who hires himself out for harvesting and sowing and such. He's discovered, accidentally, a treasure.

Two More Metaphors: Pearl

In case we don't get it, Jesus says it again, in a different way:

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

Again a man--this time someone who has wealth enough to either personally collect pearls, or simply trade in them. This man doesn't stumble upon a treasure, but he is seeking one out. When he finds it he does the same as the man in the other metaphor: He liquidates his assets, sells everything he can sell, to get this thing he was seeking.

Two More Metaphors: Commonalities

What do these metaphors share? They share selling everything to get something enormously valuable. In one, a field worker stumbles across it; In another, a wealthy merchant is seeking it out. But whatever their classes, their economic status, they'll take all that they have and use it to

get the treasure they want.

And to sell everything is to not make just a crazy, radical economic choice, but a social choice and a relational choice. It cuts you off from those who you once were connected to; it reorients your life.

Two Metaphors & Two More Metaphors: Summary

So what's the Kingdom of Heaven like so far?

It's a small thing, barely seen at first, but if you just wait, just give it time, it'll turn into something life-sustaining.

Whether or not you're looking for it, when you discover it, it's worth getting rid of everything to get it, making every economic or social cost to get it.

But Jesus isn't satisfied with just four metaphors, you know? What's that? He keeps rolling:

One More Metaphor:

47 "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Fishermen know fish, right? Which ones are good to eat, to sell, to throw back. All of us are discerning about some things: we know that this tool is higher quality than that one, that this type of thing is better than that type of thing for what we use it for. We're excellent in some area, knowledgeable about what's best when it comes to this or that thing. Discernment is the ability to judge well, by some standard of good that we, and the community of skill that we're a part of, recognize. To make discerning judgments is to make claims about that which we judge, claims of worthiness or unworthiness, of fitness or unfitness. Discernment, ultimately, reveals our estimation of a thing, what we think of it.

And the same revealing discernment characterizes the Kingdom of Heaven.

When the Kingdom of Heaven comes on earth as it is in heaven, there's judgment made among people, and a revelation, a disclosure, of whether a person is "wicked or righteous," as it's put here, faithless or faithful. Just as he did in last week's parable, Jesus implies that this judgment about people isn't made now, but at the end of time, at his return when the kingdom is fully established on earth, and those who are determined by the most skilled judge of people, "wicked" end up in grief.

So, What's the Kingdom of Heaven like?

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One More Metaphor: Summary***

It's a small thing, barely seen at first, but if you just wait, just give it time, it'll turn into something life sustaining.

Whether or not you're looking for it, when you discover it, it's worth getting rid of everything to get it, making every economic or social cost to get it for yourself.

It has standards against which all people will be measured, and it will reveal, when it's fully established, those who are faithful to God and those who aren't, and those who aren't will experience painful grief.

Five Metaphors...And A Sixth:

And I like to imagine that he's been walking, and he stops by another house, you know, this crowd around him listening, the Twelve right there, the group of antagonistic Pharisees and Teachers of the Law who are always around, and Jesus stops by a really impressive house, right? Everyone knows the owners of that place are rich. And Jesus, there, talks about household masters and their vaults. He stops, in front of this imaginary house in my head, and says:

51 "Have you understood all these things?" "Yes," they replied.

52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Remember that to be a disciple--a follower--of Jesus is to be a disciple--a follower--of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus, all along, has been living up to the Kingdom's precepts, its procedures, its priorities, and its right understanding of what it means to be God's People.

And here Jesus gives an amazing compliment to the teachers of the law, whose understanding of God he so often condemns. But of course he compliments them, right? Because he's complimenting, here, the ones who have decided to follow him. At least, he's letting those Teachers of the Law who would be a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven know that if they do, they'll have a storeroom full of treasure to offer.

For those Teachers of the Law who do follow Jesus, though, it's a costly decision. They aren't losing just the things the Twelve have lost. They're also losing their important role in the community, their religious credentials. It's hard to follow Jesus at the best of times, but when you've also given away your privileged and powerful position in the community, something most of us want and wish we had, it's almost like selling everything to get a treasure.

But if the "teachers of the law" around him have decided to be a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven, they've realized he's been right about God all along.

Jesus doesn't say the things he says from nowhere; he has a tight theology, it's simply built off and takes its cues from Old Testament Scripture that was often overlooked and dismissed by the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. Jesus is saying, in effect, that if you're a Teacher of the Law who has started to be a disciple of the Kingdom of heaven, then your storehouse--your pile of stuff--is way bigger than you thought it was. You've got the old treasures, the old wisdom and insights about God that you lived with, which you have now allowed Jesus to reshape, and, added to it, you have the new knowledge of God that Jesus, as the Messiah, is

revealing.

Jesus is giving an amazing complement to the Teachers of the Law who have chosen to follow him.

But he's also, of course, claiming something powerful for himself. To mention a "master of a house" is to bring to mind God; to talk about a "storeroom" is to bring to mind the Temple's treasury. Jesus, in a very roundabout way, is suggesting that he is the one who puts treasure in the storerooms of those who are disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven. He's reaffirming his power and privilege, which ultimately will be the only power and privilege that those Teachers of the Law who follow him will be able to claim for themselves. He's the one who, after all, teaches with authority.

The Kingdom of Heaven:

The Kingdom of Heaven is a small thing, barely seen at first, but if you just wait, just give it time, it'll turn into something life sustaining. Whether or not you're looking for it, when you discover it, it's worth getting rid of everything to get it, making every economic or social cost to get it for yourself. It has standards against which all people will be measured, and it will reveal, when it's fully established, those who are faithful to God and those who aren't, and for those who aren't, they'll experience painful grief.

And those "teachers of the law" who had become a disciple in the kingdom had a special accumulation of wisdom and insight--a treasure--that came from both what they knew about God before trusting Jesus, and the ways that knowledge had been clarified, corrected, and deepened

because of their trust in Jesus.

Not For Us...

Now: We've talked about how Matthew's gospel is one written for a primarily Jewish audience. Not explicitly Jewish, but primarily so. Matthew is writing to those who followed the ways of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Teachers of the Law, but had seen in Jesus a more complete picture of who God really was and what God really hoped for his people. What Jesus says today was most relevant for them. Do we see that? It would have been most encouraging for them, even though Jesus shares insight about the Kingdom of Heaven for any who would follow them. Because these Jewish converts, who've recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and yet have lived as faithfully to God as they were able, they're the ones with treasure old and new.

And For Us...

If it's safe to characterize the treasure that these "teachers of the Law" have as wisdom and insight into the Kingdom of Heaven, into God, then we can remember that wisdom and insight themselves take time. They take reflection. They take a commitment to really thinking about what we've gone through in light of who God is, and making sense of the world in a new way. Christianity was first called "the way" or "the road" before it was called anything else, and that name speaks to how we, as disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven, are ourselves journeying toward greater and greater faithfulness until Jesus' return. But that sort of journey requires that we leave behind some ways of thinking about God, even as we embrace them; that we're open to the Holy Spirit who teaches us, through Scripture and the Church, who God really is. How many of us would say we believe

today the exact same things about what it means to follow God as we did when we first started following him? To be someone who has new treasures as well as old ones in our storehouses is to be people who understand that we are always discovering new ways of being faithful to God, because our circumstances, which so often change, demand new ways of being faithful to God, even as we cling to the trusted, tested, old wisdom that the Church has gained.

And of course--and Matthew knew this--the Church inherited the treasures of these first "Teachers of the Law," incorporated them, and brought them into conversation with the new things that we had discovered in Jesus. You don't get a better example of someone who lives up to today's passage than Paul, even though we ourselves, in our own way, live up to it every time we discover how to be faithful to God in the new, unique situations we find ourselves in.

If?

If the Kingdom of Heaven is a small thing, barely seen at first, that if you just give time to will turn into something life sustaining, what does that mean for us? It probably means we don't measure faithfulness by the hour, but by the decade or generation. It probably means we don't pooh-pooh tiny efforts at blessing people, or tiny tithes, or tiny any faith-driven thing, because these little things accrue and grow and have enormous impact in the world.

If the Kingdom of Heaven is something that is worth getting no matter what it costs you, what does that mean for us? It probably means we should recognize that it's desirable. It's so good; it's worth more than all we've got. We ought to recognize that following Christ will always have measurable,

quantifiable costs. We'll lose something to gain everything, if we make faith-driven choices in our lives.

If the Kingdom of Heaven has standards against which all people will be measured, and when it's fully established, it will reveal those who are faithful to God and those who aren't, let's definitely, definitely make sure that we ourselves are not the ones who experience painful grief, but the ones who experience all the good that Kingdom Come brings with it.

Let's guard our faithfulness, even as we lean into the growth the Spirit brings, and discover, all the time, more ways God sustains our lives, makes our little acts of trust into impressive movements of power, and gives us wisdom and insight into how we might choose for God, rather than grief, in any given moment.