

Seeds, Pearls, & the Judgment of Judgment

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Grandma Springfield was a legendary finder of lost things. When a Hot Wheels car or silver dollar would go missing in the grass, we would run inside and pull her away from whatever she was doing and in no time what was lost would be restored to us. She also found four leaf clovers wherever she went. And these mystical powers at least felt related to the fact that the giant console stereo that Grandpa listened to St. Louis Cardinals baseball games on was something Grandma had won in a drawing at the grand opening of the Safeway in town.

This is where my mind goes when I hear Jesus describe the kingdom of heaven in terms of small, hidden things. My mind goes to Grandma and her uncanny abilities, which is not necessarily helpful. Because, as far as we could tell, what Grandma had was a knack, not a method. It wouldn't have occurred to us grandkids that we could nurture an ability to find tiny objects any more than I could will away my far sightedness or get taller just by thinking tall thoughts.

But how about you? When you hear of this kingdom of heaven, which Jesus says is like a tiny seed, like the smallest amount of yeast, like treasure buried in a field or a merchant who travels far and wide to find a single, perfect pearl, do you start wondering, "Well, what are my chances at finding this kingdom, given my very average abilities with regard to spiritual perception?" I wonder this. And, as a priest, I'm supposedly in the spiritual perception business.

But on an even more basic level, if it's a life and death matter that we find or perceive this kingdom of heaven, which the fish sorting bit and the gnashing of teeth in the furnace suggest, why won't Jesus just tell us what it is? Not tell us that it's like this and like that. Tell us what it is, Jesus. At least the merchant who searched for the pearl knew it was a pearl he was looking for? Even Grandma got a reasonably detailed description of what we'd lost?

Unless he's not actually telling us to go out and find this kingdom so much as he's telling us to learn to trust that it's already here. Even when it doesn't look or feel like there's anything that seems very precious or growing in our lives or in our world at all. What if part of the good news of this hidden kingdom really is that it's hidden? But that it's hidden in everything. Hidden even in lives and places that seem like the last ones in which anything good or godly ought to be found.

Well, there you have it. Call it a thesis or a bias, there it is. That's what I'm wondering. Let's go back to the parables and test it out.

It's worth noting first that mustard plants are basically big weeds. Shrub brushes that no one went to the nursery looking for. And what is translated as "yeast" is actually leaven, which is something quite different from the little jar of Fleischmann's in the door of your refrigerator. Leftover bread was set aside to spoil a bit in order to create leaven for future loaves. Which is why essentially everywhere else in the Bible, leaven is a metaphor for contamination. Just three chapters further on in Matthew this same Jesus will say, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees!" and no one will wonder whether leaven is a good thing.

A curious metaphor for him to use for the kingdom of heaven then, isn't it? Rather than a mustard plant being a glorious blossoming tree filled with birds in the middle of your garden, it's more like one that grows persistently from a crack in the sidewalk if you don't douse it with Roundup on a regular basis. And then he says it's like the tiniest bits of the rotting contamination we call leaven that makes wheat flour expand like a mustard weed.

But what may be stranger yet is that these parables follow the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Remember that one? Right before he tells us about the mustard bush we read, “Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” In other words, he says weeds are to be burned and wheat is to be gathered, and then he immediately says the kingdom of God is like the most vigorous of all weeds and it’s also like the spoiled contamination that needs to be added to the wheat in that barn if it’s ever to become loaves of bread.

Man, do I miss Grandma Springfield. We’re going to need a first class finder of hidden things to locate the grace in these stories. But let’s stay with them. Because if Jesus won’t tell us what the kingdom is directly, maybe he wants something we won’t accept any other way to settle into us as he adds image after image to our imagination.

Next he says the kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field, and it’s like a merchant in search of fine pearls. I don’t want to make too much of this distinction, but did you notice that in the first the kingdom is like the treasure, and in the second, it’s not like the pearl, it’s like the merchant who goes searching? Let’s set aside the questionable ethics of digging up a treasure in somebody else’s field, burying it again, and then selling everything you own to buy the field the other guy doesn’t know holds buried treasure. Or maybe we don’t set it aside. Because if we don’t, then we realize that whatever the kingdom of heaven is, it seems to be passed around among ethically questionable land speculators too.

And then we hear the kingdom is like a merchant who believes there’s a perfect pearl out there somewhere in the world, and who, like the purchaser of the field, will sell everything he owns to own a pearl like that one when he finds it. I don’t know what you do with a pearl like that once you’ve got nothing in the world but it. But Jesus holds up this pearl obsessed seeker for our consideration too. Add that to your images of this strange kingdom of heaven.

It’s a lot to take in. But then he tells us the kingdom is like one thing more. He says it’s like a net, that catches not only righteous fish, but all sorts of fish. Some of which, he says, are fit only to be thrown into a furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I don’t want to set aside the judgment image, but I do want us to hear it in its context. The context being a series of weird metaphors that expand our minds wildly as to the kind of people and places and things in this world in which the kingdom of heaven is to be found. He says, “The kingdom is like this and like this and like this and like this... It’s over there and in him and within that less than respectable thing.” So, he’s told us over and over again that it will be found in all these unlikely places. Which means, it seems to me, that the judgment will fall on those of us who keep looking for the kingdom of God where respectable folks keep expecting it to be. In other words, what’s being judged is our judgment. And he uses furnaces of fire — just as much a metaphor, please remember, as mustard seeds and leaven and buried treasure and seekers of pearls — he uses that furnace of fire to startle us into the realization that we just keep looking for God in all the wrong places and burning these lives we’ve been given right up.

That sounds like terrible news. But it’s actually the good news that I forget every single day but believe deep down that the gospel truly is. Because when I believe God shows up only to what is good and noble and true in this world, I have to tamp down or deny all that is bad and ignoble and false in me if I’m to believe I’m one of the fishes that get kept. And what our therapists and our Lord keep telling us in a hundred different ways is that the people out there who offend and infuriate us most are probably the ones who hold some kind of unwanted mirror up to our own wounded souls. The demons in our dreams, said Carl Jung, are each some denied or repressed aspect of ourselves, not of our enemies.

Which means that it truly is a parable of great grace that a mustard seed produces such a big and vibrant weed, that pure wheat flour needs a little spoiled bread if it’s ever to rise, and that God is present in shady land deals and irresponsible pearl hunters who are blind to everything else in the world.

Believing such a gospel can change us. Believing such a gospel could give us the courage to be more truthful about our fears and our failures, because it insists that the kingdom of God actually blossoms and rises and searches among the fearful and the failed. Believing this about ourselves might then make room in our hearts for the failures of our neighbors. And if we were really to let this nonsense transform us to the extent it did Jesus himself, we might even wonder whether the archest of our enemies — our crucifiers, even — is where God's kingdom is most likely to bloom into being next. Forgiveness is just how we manage to be present when it does.

Friends, I have to say I'm nowhere near that place. But I am beginning to want to want to be there. That place where what's judged is my judgment. Can you imagine what a world would open up if my judgment of myself and then of all that's outside me were to be thrown into a furnace of fire?

We live in a world where our identities hang on the bones of our enemies. Our hates are often dearer to us than our loves. Isn't that the way of being that has to be burned, according to Jesus.

So, what might help us trust this Jesus and live this way right here today? Well, Ellis Ann might. Her baptism is a sacrament and a sign of this way. First, because she can't even answer the questions we'll ask her for herself. But she will be as Christian as she will ever be. She won't be more Christian if she grows up to be the Archbishop of Canterbury or a nun serving Jesus's beloved on the streets of Calcutta. Baptism is an either/or proposition that Ellis Ann only earned by being carried in here today by Joseph and Sam. Doesn't that suggest a kingdom of grace that springs up in the unlikeliest of people and places?

But she is also a sign because as we gather around her as the first Christian community she will know, could it be any clearer to us that what we hope for her life is not that she grow into a person filled with fear and shame because her judgment has turned in on itself and begun to burn against the imperfections of her own heart. Nor do we want judgment and rage to turn outward and burn against the world all around her. What we want for her is exactly what we'll pray for: "an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love... the gift of joy and wonder..."

Maybe if we pray in the presence of the sparkling pearl of a truth that we want nothing less than this goodness for Ellis Ann's life, we will remember that down beneath our fears and our judgments and the scars they've left behind, we want nothing less for our lives either.