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Matthew 13: 31-34, 44-50

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One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about it.

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 holier-than-thou. You could talk about how your head feels full to bursting sometimes, or you could talk about how even the worst things that happen to you seem to have a hidden blessing from God in them somewhere, but the truth is that it is impossible for us to speak directly about holy things. How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God?

We do not do it well, that is for sure, but because we must somehow try to speak of God, we tend to talk about what we CANNOT say in terms of what we CAN, that is we tend to describe holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trust each other to make the connections. Believing in God is like coming home, we say. It is like being held in the palm of a warm loving hand. It is like falling in love. We cannot say what it is, exactly, but we can say what it is like, and most of us get the message.

If you still have your notes from High School English class, you can probably find the section on figures of speech, where this way of talking is called talking in metaphors – talking about one thing by referring to another thing, getting at the meaning of one thing by comparing

it to another. Sometimes the comparisons are comfortable and familiar. Her eyes were as blue as the sky, as blue as a robin's egg, as blue as the sea.

But other times the comparisons are a little more startling. Her eyes were as blue as a bruise, as blue as an ink jet spilled on a white page, as blue as a wave just before it breaks. When the comparisons catch us by surprise they make us stop, make us think. How can these two things be alike? What do they have in common? When the comparisons catch us by surprise, 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 it all the time. Throughout the gospels, and in Matthew's Gospel in particular, he was always making comparisons. Sinners are like lost sheep, the word of God is like seed sown on different kinds of ground, the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast, and God is the owner of the vineyard. "The kingdom of heaven is like this..." Jesus said over and over again, telling his followers stories about brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and weeds.

Have you ever wondered why he taught that way? Why didn't he just come right out and say what he meant? If anyone in the world were qualified to speak directly about God, surely it was Jesus, and yet he too spoke indirectly, making surprising comparisons between holy things and ordinary things, breaking open our everyday understanding of things and inviting us to explore them all over again.

In the passage we have just heard, Jesus throws out a number of such comparisons. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, he says, 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 preparations, no explanation, and no time for questions and answers. It is not like Jesus to be in such a rush. He is usually a better story teller than, that, gathering his listeners around him and sliding into a tale with one of those time-honored introductions like, “There once was a landowner...” or “There once was a king...” when he does, his followers settle down to listen, knowing that the story will be full of meaning for them, knowing that they had better listen well.

But these five flashes of the kingdom come at us so quickly that there is not time to settle down at all. Jesus zings us with them – 1,2,3,4,5 – like snapshots. The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this, he says. It is almost as if he does not want us to think too much about them, as if he does not want us to get stuck on any one of them but be dazzled by the number and variety of the things the kingdom of heaven is like – like this and this and this.

The first two comparisons seem easy enough. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or a handful of yeast- nothing much to look at, not very impressive, at least not at first; but give either of them something to work on- sow the seed, mix the yeast with flour and the results can be astounding: a tree big enough for a bird to nest in, bread enough to feed the family for a month. If the kingdom of heaven is like that, then it is surprising, and potent, more than meets eye.

The next pair of comparisons is more difficult. First, the kingdom is like a man who finds buried treasure in a field, covers it back up and sells all that he owns to buy the field. He is a poor man who becomes a rich man through luck. And the second, the kingdom is like a

merchant who searches for and finds a pearl of great price, selling all that he owns to buy it. He is a rich man who becomes a richer man through skill. But rich or poor, skillful or just plain lucky, each man finds something that makes everything else he owns seem trivial by comparison, and he does not think twice about trading it all in. If the kingdom of heaven is like that, then it is rare but attainable, for those who are not only willing but also eager to pay the price.

The final comparison – of the kingdom of heaven and a fishing net- takes a different way all together. Thrown into the sea, the net gathers fish of every kind, good and bad, which are sorted out once the net is full. If the kingdom of heaven is like that, then it is NOT, in the end something WE find, but something that FINDS US and hauls us out of the dark, murky waters into the light.

It is a lot to think about in one sitting, but the striking thing about all of these images is their essential HIDDENNESS – the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast hidden in the dough, the treasure hidden in the fields, the pearl hidden among all the other pearls, the net hidden in the depths of the sea. If the kingdom is like these, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye, but something just below the surface of things waiting there to be discovered and claimed.

Information like that has always intrigued the human imagination. A retired school bus driver takes up rock collecting and spends his weekends at local flea markets looking for interesting stones. One day he picks up a round one, about the size of a walnut, and likes the way it feels in his hand. So he buys it and takes it home, polishes it up and shows it to his friend

the jeweler, who tells him that what he had bought for a dollar and a half is two hundred fifty carat ruby.

Or a poor single mother is notified of her maiden aunt's death in a distant city. Since she is the woman's only relative, she buys a bus ticket with the end of her grocery money and goes to sort through the woman's things. Packing her aunt's old brown wool coat in a box for the Salvation Army, she feels something stiff down around the hem and discovers hundred dollar bills sewn into the lining.

Or a young research librarian without an adventurous bone in his body is shelving old books one day when one falls apart in his hands. As he tries to stack all the loose pages together again, a yellowed slip of paper falls out of the lined binding. Picking it up off the floor and holding it to the light, he finds himself staring at an ancient map to the fountain of youth.

If is the stuff legends are made of – the sunken treasure, the secret knowledge, the long lost masterpiece gathering dust in the attic suddenly discovered, suddenly found and claimed and enjoyed amidst much celebration. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says. Whether it begins as a seed hidden in the ground, or a treasure hidden in the 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 for everyone to see.

It is an exciting business, but where do we begin? Without a treasure map, or a maiden aunt, or much luck shopping for rubies, where do we start looking for the hidden kingdom of heaven? All of these metaphors are fine, all of these parables about seed and yeast and nets

are very interesting, but when it comes right down to hunting the honest –to-goodness kingdom of heaven, where are we supposed to start?

It seems like we ought to start some place really holy, some place really extraordinary, like a medieval monastery maybe, or the Holy Land, or a magnificent Cathedral. Then again it may not matter Where we are exactly as long as we keep our eyes open for extraordinary clues wherever we are – looking out for heavenly visions, listening for heavenly voices. Because the kingdom of God is hidden in this world, it is hidden really well, and only the most dedicated detectives among us stand a chance of finding it at all.

Unless, of course, God has resorted to the oldest trick in the book and hidden it in plain view. There is always that possibility, you know – that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check but the last place that any of us would think to look – namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives – like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless steel – the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed in with the humdrum ho-hum of our days, as easy to find as one of my daughter’s smiles when she awakens from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long drought – all of them signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullest of our days.

Jesus knew it all along. Why else would he talk about heaven in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and merchants buying and selling things, and fishermen sorting fish, unless he meant somehow to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special

map but the “X” marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities of our lives?

If we want to speak of heavenly things, Jesus seems to say, we may begin by speaking about earthly things, and if we want to describe that which is beyond all words, (heaven and God) we may begin with words we know, words such as: man, woman, field, seed, bird, air, yeast, bread, words such as; pearl, net, sea, fish, joy. The kingdom is like these things, the kingdom is found in these things. 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 cannot see the presence of God, hidden in our everyday lives, then we will never see it anywhere else, because earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having. AMEN.