

[Genesis 29:15-28](#)

[Psalm 105:1-11, 45b](#)

or [Psalm 128](#)

[Romans 8:26-39](#)

[Matthew 13:31-33,44-52](#)

Today's Gospel lesson gives us five of Jesus' parables about what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like a tiny mustard seed which grows into a tree to bless many creatures. It's like the leaven which transforms flour into bread. It is like a treasure hidden in a field, or like a pearl of such unparalleled value that it is worth giving up everything else to possess it. Finally, the kingdom is like a net cast into the sea, pulling up fishes of every kind. Let's start with that one.

This last parable echoes the parable of the wheat and the tares which we heard last week. Both good and bad are found in the divine wheatfield or the divine net, but in the end and after a long season of growth followed by all the work of harvesting and winnowing, then only the good remain. As Paul says of this mixed bag of good and evil, in the end ("... all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.")

In general, parables raise more questions than answers, and that is the function of a parable, not to provide simple answers, but to get us to think. One of the first questions raised by the parables we heard this morning is this: Is the kingdom of God a present reality, or will it be a future reality? Does it exist here and now, or will it only be available to those in some future time?

The answer is, yes.

The very first words out of Jesus' mouth in the first of the four gospels are, "The kingdom of God is at hand." That is as ambiguous as the parables themselves. Does he mean that the kingdom is here and happening now, or that the kingdom is not here yet, but coming soon? These parables have something to say about this.

A lot of folks think of the kingdom of God in the same way that we generally think of the lottery. It comes as a surprise and, very suddenly, all at once, everything is

different. But Jesus paints a different picture. The kingdom of God does not start out as a great bush sheltering God's creatures. It starts out as a seed so small as to be difficult for some of us to even see. It does not come to us as a fully baked loaf of bread handed down from heaven, but begins with the addition of a tiny bit of leaven worked into the larger lump of flour.

The implication is that kingdom of God does not come suddenly from outside, but rather grows inwardly, inside of us. Jesus tells us, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

In the same vein, Paul tells the Galatians that the Father, "was pleased to reveal his son *in me*," for the purpose of proclaiming the Good News to the Gentiles.

The Christ that dwells - often hidden - within us is the treasure hidden in a field, it is the pearl of great price that

is worth abandoning everything else to pursue and possess.

One of the things that is confusing to American readers is the idea of a mustard seed growing into a tree. If you plant mustard in your garden, as my father once did, it will grow, not like a tree, but like a weed. Once planted, the white mustard seed has to be contained rather than cultivated. But the black mustard seed common to the Middle East does in fact grow into a shrub and can even become a tree 10-12 feet tall. It is commonly used as animal feed, and it is quite large enough for wild birds to build nests in its branches.

But the mustard seed does not grow overnight. It takes patience and probably a good deal of care and pruning to become a tree such as Jesus describes. So it is with God's kingdom. It may seem insignificant and tiny, but with patience and tender care, it grows.

Similarly, one does not merely sprinkle a little yeast onto a ball of dough and -- poof! -- there's a loaf of bread. It takes actual work and effort to work the yeast into the dough so that it permeates the whole loaf. So it is with the Gift of God's leavening. If you really desire God's kingdom in your life God will give it to you freely, but you are going to have to knead it into every aspect of your life, so that the whole loaf can rise to feed you and those you love.

So a second thing we can take from these parables is that, in this broken world, the coming of God's kingdom will require patience from us, but not merely patience, also actual work if we wish to see it grow.

In the next two parables, Jesus speaks of the preciousness, the priceless nature of possessing the kingdom of God within our own hearts and how essential it is, if we wish to possess it, that we be willing to give up everything for it. You can know the scriptures front to back. You can understand the inner workings of God's universe. But if you do not possess the *desire* for God,

more than anything else in life, more than anyone else in your life... if you do not desire God above all of God's gifts, God will continue to withhold Godself from you. God never forces Godself upon us. But when we truly desire God and only God, then God gives himself freely.

The parable of the pearl of great price and the parable of the treasure hidden in a field both stand for the proposition that, if you truly want to become one with the Father in the way that Jesus and the Father are one, you must be willing to sacrifice everything else in life to attain it. Everything.

Once we do gain possession of that very great treasure, the image and likeness of God which lies buried in our hearts, will grow. It will transform our flour into nourishing bread. It will grow and become a resting place providing not only shade for us and our fellows, but also a nesting place for the wild things of God's world.

The English theologian and biblical scholar C.H. Dodd wrote this about parables:

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

The parables aren't there to give us answers. They are given to make us ask questions. What is the most precious thing in my life? What is most important to me? Is it the love of God? How long do I have to wait to see results? How long and how much effort is it going to take to grow this tiny, tiny seed into a tree? How much kneading do I have to do to work the leavening of the Father into every nook and cranny of my life?

And what happens when I get to the end of my life and my field, though full of wheat, still contains lots of weeds, or my net is full but contains fish of every kind, including lots

of inedible fish? God, says Jesus, will see that it gets sorted out.

As the anonymous author of the 14th Century Cloud of Unknowing says, God does not see us for what we are or what we have done. What God sees when God looks at us is the person we truly desire to be. Certainly one of the most important teachings we can glean from these parables is, if God is your highest desire, your most precious thought, you already have everything you need. That thought is the mustard seed which, though very small, will one day grow into the kingdom of God.