

Of Seeds and Yeast and Hidden Riches, Of Treasured Pearls and Fishes
Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 24, 2005

The Walrus and the Carpenter went walking one fine night.
The odd thing was, as they soon found, the sun was shining bright.
They came upon an oyster bed, and asked them out to walk.
Young oysters came out eagerly, nary a one did balk.

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”

Those of you who know Lewis Carroll’s marvelous poem, “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” (from his book, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872) will remember that the two title characters carry on their comic conversation concerning shoes and ships and ceiling wax and cabbages and kings in order to distract the naïve, young oysters from realizing that they are about to become the main entrée at a midnight beachside clambake.

It’s rather surprising to learn that Jesus employed the same narrative strategy when he was teaching the crowds of people who came to hear his message about God’s kingdom. When his disciples asked Jesus why he taught in parables, Jesus answered, “to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. . . . The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand’” (Mt. 13:11, 13). When Jesus speaks in parables, then, with all their funny characters and strange plot twists, he is revealing to his followers the secrets of the kingdom.

And so, my friends, with apologies to Lewis Carroll, the time has come, the preacher said, to talk of many things: of seeds and yeast and hidden riches, of treasured pearls and fishes.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like this,” Jesus said. “Once upon a time, somebody took a little, tiny mustard seed and sowed it in his field. Before long, that little, tiny seed had grown into a bush—no, a tree!—and the birds came and made nests in its branches.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is also like this,” Jesus continued. “Once upon a time, some sly chick took some old, rotten leftover yeast and tossed it in a big industrial-size flour container. She mixed it up pretty well until the whole, huge batch was leavened.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is also like this,” Jesus added. “Once upon a time, a poor, hard-working farmer was plowing a field, when all of a sudden—wham!—the plow hits something. He digs around a little, and finds that it’s hidden treasure. So he covers up the jar, runs into town, sells everything, and buys the field.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is also like this,” Jesus pressed on. “Once upon a time, a pearl wholesaler had spent his entire career searching for the very finest pearls. When he found one pearl of exceptional value, he went home, sold the business, and used the proceeds to buy it.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is also like this,” Jesus concluded. “Once upon a time, a net was thrown into the sea and caught every kind of fish. When the net was full, they dragged it in and sorted the fish, throwing the good ones into a basket, but tossing out the bad ones.”

They’re odd little stories when you think about them: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a guy who plants a mustard seed and without the aid of Miracle-Gro® grows this tree. It’s like a woman who sneaks into the Mrs. Bairds® plant with her nasty leftovers for some extreme baking. The Kingdom is like some poor schmo who literally stumbles over this incredible treasure or like this sophisticated jeweler who has spent his whole life looking for a fine pearl.

When they find these treasures, both men sell everything they have to get them. And the Kingdom of Heaven is also like a huge catch of fish: the good ones are taken away to be sold or eaten, but the bad ones never see the light of day; they are tossed out and burned.

What is Jesus trying to tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven, meaning that time and that place when God will rule the world directly and God's will will be done? The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast tell us about the amazing growth of God's kingdom from the very humblest of beginnings, and all without our seeing it happen. Now it is true that mustard seeds are not the smallest of all seeds, and that no mustard plant grows large enough to host a flock of nesting birds. And the woman with her leaven is not innocently preparing a mix for the bread maker: she is hiding the leaven in about 50 pounds of flour, enough to make bread for 100 people. This is one reason why we shouldn't always read the Bible literally: not everything is meant to be taken literally. Jesus is using exaggeration to make a point. When we talk about the Kingdom of Heaven, we are not talking about everyday realities, but about "divine realities."¹

And one reality of God's Kingdom is that it works without our seeing it or knowing that it is at work. As regards both the mustard seed in the ground and the leaven in the flour, Jesus tells us the beginning and the end of the story, but not the middle. We can't see the seed as it is transformed into a plant, nor can we observe the yeast as it leavens the flour. We modern, scientific Americans want to know what's going on and how things happen. But Jesus is content to tell us that out of a little, tiny seed grows a pretty sizable plant and that from some old, leftover yeast comes enough bread to feed an army. And the Kingdom of Heaven is like that. It goes about its work quietly, almost imperceptibly, until something amazing turns out. As Tom Long says, "This greatness does not come in the form we expect."²

¹ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963) 147.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 153.

Jesus also tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven, though small and often hidden, demands a response when we encounter it. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price tell us that no matter how we find it, the kingdom is so incredibly valuable, we ought to do whatever we can to have it. The two parables seem alike: in both, men discover unimaginable treasure and sell all they have in order to possess it. What sets the stories apart is how they find the treasure. One man just happens upon treasure hidden in a field. He wasn't looking for it; he literally stumbled over it. But when he found it, he wanted to make sure it would remain his, so he buried the treasure and went and sold all his possessions and bought the field. He is like many of us: people living their everyday lives, going about their routines, expecting nothing but the usual. "But, then, something wonderful and surprising happens."² Sometimes, the Kingdom appears suddenly, from out of nowhere, and you know that you have to have it, and life will never be the same again.

The other man had been looking for fine pearls all his life; he had devoted himself and his career to finding the very best pearl. One day his search leads him to the most beautiful and precious pearl he has ever seen. He calls his lawyer and his accountant and tells them to sell the entire wholesale operation: this is a pearl of exceptional value. This is a man, who like many of us, is on a quest, searching for answers, for meaning, to make sense of it all. Maybe we have taken other paths in the search, only to end up amazed at the riches that we find in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Upon making their discoveries, both men go and sell all that they own in order to secure their treasures. Having the Kingdom may cost us everything, but this is no sacrifice. What we gain in giving up our treasure is of far greater value, and that is treasure in heaven.

What, then, of the net and the fish? What can fish possibly tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? I think Tom Long is right when he reminds us that when a fisherman casts his net, he

² Long, *ibid.*

has no idea what kind of fish he will catch: “Game fish, meat fish, tropical fish, trash fish—they are all gathered up in the net. The fisherman doesn’t hesitate to cast the net for fear that the wrong kind of fish will be caught. He casts his net wide and deep. The sorting out of the good fish from the bad takes place later.”³

And so it is with the Kingdom of Heaven. God casts the net wide and deep, waiting with eager anticipation to see what will get caught. Some who are caught will be hungry for God’s word and eager to do God’s work. Others want nothing to do with God. The Church, as the sign of God’s coming Kingdom, is to be “wonderfully nondiscriminatory”: to welcome those who enter our doors, whether they seek simply a place to get married or to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. The job of separating serious from frivolous, earnest from opportunist, good from bad is the job of the angels.

And so the Kingdom of Heaven is like seeds and yeast—small and hidden, but potent with incredible growth; like hidden riches and treasured pearls—so incredibly valuable that we should drop everything to have it; like a great net—catching us up, one and all, in God’s mighty acts of salvation in Jesus Christ. The time has come, the Savior says, to bring God’s kingdom in: to love and heal and reconcile, to free the world from sin. And so God sent the world his Son, that all might learn and live the life to which God calls us all, the life Christ died to give.

³ Ibid., 158. I am indebted to Thomas Long for the metaphor that dominates the following paragraph.