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The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

Again, again, again. Our passage from Matthew this week reminds me a bit of life with small children. Again, again, again, are words I hear early and often. And, like the disciples, as my three year olds ramble on and on, I always find myself nodding in agreeance. Uttering mhmmm mhmmm. Like, “yes, I understand completely what you are saying.” When in fact I have no clue whatsoever. And, while I never want to say I don’t understand, at the risk of looking inept, or more over having to listen to the whole shebang again, I really, really, really wish the disciples had said in our passage today said, “no.” “No, Jesus, we do not understand what the heck you are saying. And, we would really appreciate it if you could spell it out for us. Slowly, and possibly with small, easily digestible words.”

Parables, like metaphors or similes, are literary tools used to help the listener grasp a concept that might otherwise be difficult to explain or define in concrete and tactile ways. Moreover, they are meant to do so in a meaningful and memorable manner. And, in Jesus’ case, to provoke the imagination of the listener, and reveal truths about the world around us, to those, as he said “with ears to hear”. But, tools are only as useful as in and as much as we know how to use them. And the tools, or parables, we have been given, may not hit home for us here and now. For example, before I had children, I understood the metaphor of a rug rat was in reference to a small child. But, it wasn’t until I had my own tiny humans overtaking my rugs, like oversized rodents scurrying around, making messes on the floor, and leaving stains on my carpets, that I fully grasped the concept of a rug rat.

In looking at the five parables we are presented with today we can see how Jesus is trying to explain the kingdom of heaven to his listeners, using reference points that would allow them to grasp a seemingly incomprehensible concept. Here Jesus uses everyday concepts and references that would have been familiar and easily digestible. Unfortunately, for us though, these parables, or at least their references, as I mentioned earlier, have become a bit antiquated for our modern day senses.

But, I believe, if we take a closer look we might find the gift in Jesus’ words than and there, for us here and now. Beginning with the mustard seed. While a small and insignificant grain, it is not actually the smallest, nor was that really the point. The mustard plant Jesus references could be seen as modern day kudzu, quick growing and very invasive, this bush was seen as a serious threat to any neatly arranged farmers field. And, while the beauty and good news of this parable may be that the overgrown trash bush which now invites every bird of the air to make their home in its wild and overgrown branches, this certainly would not have been seen as good news to any skilled or knowledgeable farmer. And what about the leaven, while a necessary ingredient for any baker, this cooking agent was often associated with evil and uncleanness. A substance derived from spoiled bread. Not spoiled enough, the leaven would leave the dough flat and dry. Spoiled too long and it could become deadly. Left to spoil for just the right amount of time, the leaven could uplift and enliven any lifeless mound of dough, giving rise to its meager size and allowing the powdered grain to become the main course of an overcrowded wedding feast.

Ok, so, lets see what we have learned so far? The kingdom of heaven comes from meager, possibly even despised, detested, and certainly disregarded, beginnings. It can be overlooked, and derided. But, it is available, it is abounding, it is fast growing, and most of all it is life giving.

Now, what about our (I’m going to call him a) swindler who finds treasure in someone else’s field, hides it and then sells all he has to obtain it? Or the merchant obtaining the finest pearl? It should be noted that

these two individuals would have been viewed as dubious, if not completely despicable, individuals during their time. You can think of the merchant as, say, a used car salesman. And, the man in the field as a picker, practically stealing a rare find from under its owner's nose. Is the kingdom of heaven really available to this kind of people? And, for that matter, are these the characters that, not only desire to inhabit the kingdom, but actually get to? It seems, Jesus says, yes.

Finally, the net full of fish of every kind. And the division of good from bad. Oh yeah, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. What about these? The late Christian blogger and author, Rachel Held Evans, argued that Jesus used the parables to provoke and surprise. Suggesting that our familiarity with these “often-told tales can numb us to their provocations.” While, “many parables remain confounding... especially to the modern American reader.” Quoting Amy-Jill Levine, Evans argues, “When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict, and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to us multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables, and, so, ourselves... We might be better off thinking less about what [the parables] ‘mean’, and more about what they can ‘do’: remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb.”

If the point of Jesus’ ministry on earth was to help us understand, see, and experience the presence of the kingdom of heaven right here and right now, might it be able to help us understand its urgency as well. The idea about the weeping and gnashing of teeth terrifies me, I believe, because I know what it looks and sounds like. It looks like families torn apart by political and ideological differences, unable to share their lives much less a meal together. It looks like the faces of those we see on the street begging for money, knowing well and good that our dollar bills won’t fix the problem but not knowing what will. It sounds like news reports of more wildfires consuming our land, and wars overtaking the nations of our world. When we look at the life of Jesus on this earth, we can see that he did two main things, according to the Gospels, he told stories and healed people. I wonder if these two things are not mutually exclusive. I wonder if the parables Jesus told were an invitation into a larger story about healing. About our healing, God’s healing, the world’s healing! If we were to tell a story about the kingdom of heaven, in relation to our everyday world, here and now, what would it look like? Would it look like a blessing box, filled to the brim, welcoming anyone who wishes to receive its gifts? Would it look like old friends sitting together at coffee hour and inviting new members to come to sit with them? Would it look like reaching across the proverbial isle and truly listening to the opinions of those who differ, simply to offer our presence and not our opinion?

The truth is we don’t have to wait until the end of the age to experience weeping and gnashing of teeth, nor do we have to wait to experience the kingdom of heaven. We simply have to look to Jesus, to his greatest teaching, Loving God with all our heart, mind and soul and loving our neighbor as ourselves. This is our call and our charge to urgently claim the kingdom here, now, and today!