

## **People Can Be Pretty Messed Up**

Our Old Testament lesson, from Genesis, is filled with some interesting stuff. For starters, we see how messed up the human condition can get with regards to relationships. Jacob, whose name in the original language has a connotation of deception, “gets played” – deceived – for the first time in his life by his uncle Laban on his wedding night. I can’t imagine how it happened that Jacob didn’t realize he’d gotten Leah instead of Rachel until the next morning, but that’s what happened. Maybe he got really lit at his wedding party, I don’t know. To add injury to insult, Leah was an unwanted wife, while Rachel was the love of Jacob’s life.

Now in our culture, having more than one wife at a time is uncommon – it’s actually illegal. The point I want to make though, is that when we focus on what we want – as humans, being selfish and self-centered – instead of what God wants for us, all our relationships get messed up. That goes for relationships between us and God, between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, and even strangers. The world’s been messed up for thousands of years – in desperate need of Jesus Christ to save and fix it!

Kendra and I recently took a trip to Holmes County. That’s an interesting place. It’s like stepping back in time to the 1950’s or so. By 6:00 in the evenings, most everything was closed. On Sunday, the whole area was a ghost town. We were very nearly the only car on the streets of Berlin and Millersburg, on our way back to Shelby County. Another interesting thing we noticed was that different groups – Amish, Old style Mennonites, Progressive Mennonites, and others – all seemed to get along side-by-side without causing harm to each other. It was a beautiful thing to see! Today, I’d like to look at some additional words Jesus had to say about the kingdom of heaven, found in Matthew’s gospel. If you brought your Bible, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52. I’ll be reading from the NRSV this morning.

**Read Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52.**

## **The Mustard Seed**

The parables we heard Jesus tell today are all about the kingdom of heaven. He says God’s kingdom is like a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure that can be buried, and a pearl – all very small things which have the potential to lead to big changes. The kingdom is also like a net full of all kinds of fish, which will be sorted out at the end. And finally, the kingdom is made up of old and new treasures that are meant to be put on display and knowledgeably shared.

The first four images share the trait of being small but potentially impactful. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in

his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches,” (Matt. 13:31-32). A mustard seed is the smallest seed they have in that part of the world. They’re about the same size as the end of a push pin. As an adult plant, they can grow to be ten or twelve feet tall. It ends up being big enough, and sturdy enough, for bird nests. Unimpressive at its origin – just like a baby born in a stable – the mustard seed becomes home for many living things. God’s kingdom welcomes many into the security of its branches.

### **The Yeast**

Next, Jesus talks about yeast. He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened,” (verse 33). That doesn’t sound all that earth-shattering, until you find out how the original phrasing describes it. A couple commentaries suggest that the “three measures” of flour actually works out to be between eighty and a hundred pounds of dough. Can you picture that? A grandma-type woman kneading eighty pounds worth of dough? It would look like Macho Man Randy Savage’s girlfriend Wendy – remember her from Saturday morning WWF episodes – trying to wrestle Hulk Hogan for the championship belt. It would be a lot of work!

Just a little yeast makes all the dough rise. It’s such a powerful image, that the word “leaven,” got put in the dictionary because of it! If you look in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it associates the word with anything that “produces profound change by progressive inward operation; a pervasive influence that transforms something.” Jesus tells His disciples later, in Matthew 16, to “watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” (Matt. 16:6). The yeast and its leavening effect can be a good formation, or not – not all inner transformation is kingdom transformation. But – even a small amount of grace and hope, a small dose of God’s kingdom – has the ability to spread itself throughout our lives and leaven (change) our entire existence. That might help us also to be more enjoyable to others!

### **The Buried Treasure**

Then Jesus talks about a buried treasure. He says, “the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field,” (Matt. 13:44). For about ten years the History Channel has been running a series about some buried treasure up in Canada, called *The Curse of Oak Island*. Anyone here ever watch that show? These two brothers bought the island, and have been trying to find some pirate’s treasure that’s supposedly buried there. As you can imagine, they find just enough to keep the audience wound up enough to tune in next week!

In the parable, the treasure-finder decides that this treasure is worth keeping safe, so he’s willing to do whatever he needs to do to be able to buy the field where

he's buried the treasure. In order to preserve what seems to be a small treasure – maybe a terra cotta jug full of gold coins – he's able to rebury it pretty quickly, it appears, he sells everything he has in exchange for the field. See friends, that's how ancient people did things. They couldn't take their silver or gold dollars to US Bank or any of the other ones we have today to deposit it. They buried it out in their fields while no one else was around. That's why archaeologists find so many of these urns and stuff filled with old coins in the Holy Land. That's just how they did things in those days.

Jesus is transitioning our focus on the small-beginnings-but-big-impact of His kingdom to a sense of priceless value here. Once we've gotten to experience it, we want to hold onto it – if we know what we've gotten! So think about this. In the old days, people would have walked through the field where this same guy had previously buried his treasure, completely unaware of the priceless treasure under their feet.

In 1986, a lady by the name of Natalie Sleeth wrote a song, dedicated to her husband who was dying from cancer. We sang it a few weeks ago. One of the lines in *Hymn of Promise* says, "Unrevealed until its season, Something God alone can see," (UMH 707). Isn't that just like God's kingdom? We walk around and miss the presence of God's kingdom all the time.

### **The Pearl**

We miss it, because we cannot see what is waiting, just below the surface of things – in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in the creation all around us. If we knew exactly what we were missing – the depth of relationship Christ was giving to us, and to others, through Him – we'd run to secure it so we'd never miss out ever again! Jesus makes another comparison to a small thing. He says, "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it," (verses 45-46).

The merchant who searches for the pearl is rewarded, but he still has to invest to enjoy it. How often do we know what we have in Jesus, but refuse to invest in Him? I've never preached on tithing, but here are some Biblical grounds for it. If we don't put our money where our mouth is, what good is our faith? The merchant knows what he's looking for, knows how much it's worth, and is ready and willing to give up everything else in order to keep the pearl of great value.

The mustard seed and the yeast parables remind us that the kingdom of God has a powerful transformative effect. The way the treasure in the field and the pearl are bought through the willingness to part with everything else of worldly value reminds us that God's kingdom is not of this world and requires commitment and sacrifice on our part. We have to be willing to put away the old self, so the new, transformed self can thrive.

## **The Net**

The final comparison makes us think and look at the kingdom from a different perspective. So far, we've looked internally – at ourselves – but this last parable, of the net, should make us consider the relationship of others to Jesus. Jesus says:

“the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” (verses 47-50).

Friends, that's the end-times reality of God's kingdom. Here we're told that the kingdom's like a big net which doesn't care what it catches and impacts with its goodness and transformative presence right now. But the time's going to come – on Judgment Day – when the good, the bad, and the ugly will all be sorted out. And what doesn't belong in God's kingdom will be dealt with. There's going to come a time when people are going to have to pay the piper!

To be sure, it's a warning about what's to come, but it's also some advice, too. As kingdom citizens, we sow the seeds of the kingdom – without regard to the type of person we're sowing them into – just like the farmer we talked about a couple weeks ago. We don't get to choose who deserves to be caught up in the net, we just seek to be people of the good dough wherever we are – to whomever we're around. See, Jesus, in His wisdom, even checks to make sure His disciples understand what He's telling them.

## **Hidden and Mixed In**

He says, “Have you understood all this?” (verse 51), and of course, they answer – just as we do today – “Yes.” He goes on to say, “Every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old,” (verse 52). We're people so focused on what we've got – a relationship with God through the redemption of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ – and we're being trained as the merchant was, for the kingdom of heaven.

We are well-versed on its goods. Think on that for just a minute with me. You know the old stories. You know all about those Bible heroes you heard of in Vacation Bible School, or Sunday School, or in your childhood – stories of Jonah and the whale, Jacob's ladder, Noah and the ark, God through Moses parting the Red Sea – the list goes on and on. We're well-versed in the goods of the kingdom of heaven, because the goods are to show compassion.

The common theme underlying all of it is that God shows His mercy and compassion on undeserving people in remarkable, and awe-inspiring ways. So is it our

job to point out to others all the flaws they've got? To tell them, "you're a sinner, and God can't use you?" Most people, if they're honest, are acutely aware that they are a sinner. Our job is to introduce them to God's grace found in Jesus Christ.

It's not our job to judge. We're called to sow the seed – to spread the Good News – that despite their sin, and ours, Jesus loves us anyhow! We're called to follow Jesus' Great Commandment – to love God and love neighbor. These are the goods of the kingdom of heaven. It's the leavening that's hidden and mixed in, which causes internal – and external – transformation of our world by and through Jesus Christ. And through all of it, the Holy Spirit moves in old ways, and new ways, allowing us to bring the blessings out to be shared, proud of what we have in Him, who we are becoming, and proud of the One to whom we belong.

**Prayer:** Sovereign God, in Jesus Christ You set Your holy reign upon this earth and within Your people. So let its coming be like the mustard seed that grows into greatness, and like the leaven that mixes with the grain until the whole becomes greater, to Your praise and glory alone, O God! Amen.