

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 (NRSV)

He put before them another parable: "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."

He told them another parable: "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." ...

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, 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.

"Again, 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.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel reading reminds me of fireworks on the Fourth of July – bang, bang, bang, five parables, one right after the other. And they're beautiful, mysterious a little bit, intriguing. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure hidden in the field, like a pearl of great price, like a fishing net.

Now, we know that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't so much a place as it is a way of living. But the comparisons in this reading come so quickly that it's hard to make sense of them.

But let's try to do just that. What do you think all these comparisons have in common? (Take a few suggestions.) Let me give you a hint. Remember in the second comparison, the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with the flour? Well, in the Greek, what the parable actually says is, the woman *hid* the leaven in the flour. Now, we don't exactly know why a woman would hide leaven in flour, but it does match up a little better with the next couple of parables, where the kingdom is compared with a treasure *hidden* in a field, or a merchant *searching* for fine pearls.

One sense we get from this rapid-fire set of parables is that the Kingdom is *hidden* – hidden in the flour, in the field, underneath the water, in the tiny seed. Certainly we get the sense that the Kingdom is a thing of great value, like a pearl or a treasure.

And certainly there is a sense that the Kingdom is paradoxical and surprising. Just as a quick digression, to Jesus' Jewish audience, the idea that the kingdom was like leaven would be a scandalous notion. Leaven, or yeast, was considered somehow unclean. Unleavened bread, the bread of the Passover, was the proper way to prepare and eat bread. Similarly, the mustard seed and the mustard bush would have been a strange idea for the Kingdom of Heaven. Great majestic trees, the cedars of Lebanon, were the customary way of thinking about the Kingdom, rather than some unkempt bush that might grow to 9 or 10 feet. So, the parables offer visions of the Kingdom of Heaven that would have been shocking and surprising to the original audience.

OK, we have that the Kingdom of Heaven is of great value but it's paradoxical, unexpected and hidden. This is very different

from the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven will be inaugurated at the end of time, in some catastrophic event, some war or some huge battle between angels and demons. No, the Kingdom would be hidden and surprising, arising where it wasn't expected.

Now, how do you hide things? One way, of course, is to put them out of sight, underneath something else. But there is another way, isn't there? To hide something in plain sight. To put it out there in front of everyone, but in such a way that it wouldn't be seen or wouldn't be recognized. My friend Kathy Dangin recently gave me a copy of a book that she is going to be using with her students – it's called "Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules for Considerate Conduct." She gave it to me because she figured I'd use it in sermons but of course I never use books in sermons – well, maybe just this once.

The first rule of considerate conduct is simple – *Pay Attention*. And even though this isn't really a religious book, "Paying Attention" seems to me to be a very religious notion. We're called to love God and to love one another and the first thing that means is to pay attention. Our attention, to people and things is a gift, arguably the best gift we can give. When we pay attention to our children, our friends, we are really offering them ourselves.

And when we pay attention, signs of the Kingdom are all around us. Hillary and Maddy Berche came with me down to Solomons Nursing Center to visit with Bill and Jo At Lee, even though Jo was very ill and I'm sure Hill and Maddy had things that would have been more fun to be doing. I'm also remembering the young people and adults and Pastor Wendy who gave a week of their time for work camp, helping people who needed help. And I'm remembering Miss Tierney and Miss Donna and all of our young people and grown ups who also gave up a week to help with Vacation Bible School. And I'm thinking of Tim Schwartz's and Ann Wolfgang's tireless efforts getting the plans for the North

Wing through the permitting process, even though this has got to be the most irritating work I can imagine.

We may think that the Kingdom of Heaven will come with a crash and a bang, all very dramatic, but Jesus tells us that in fact the Kingdom is already here, already within and among us, like leaven in bread or a seed in the ground or a treasure in the field if we just pay attention. The Kingdom is hidden, but it is hidden in plain sight, all around us for those who are able to see things of great value. As Jim Wallis is fond of telling us, “We are the people we have been waiting for.”

Did you notice how the reading ends? Jesus asks the disciples, “Have you understood all this?” and they answer “Yes.” He doesn’t question this, even though I’m sure he could have, but instead talks about scribes trained for the kingdom. Now, mostly in the Gospels scribes are not spoken of in very favorable terms, so this came as a bit of a surprise to me. Perhaps it shouldn’t have – in Matthew’s time, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the scribe becomes the teacher and the memory of Jewish and also Christian scriptures and traditions. Scribes were the people who taught and explained the scriptures, who, in essence brought out what was hidden, what was old and what was new from the treasure that is Scripture. So, today if we are to be scribes who pay attention to scripture in the life of the people of God, then we need to understand and teach the Bible and how the Book of Faith instructs our hopes and our behavior today. And we bring to attention what sometimes seems hidden, the work of God in the world.

A final thought. As many of you know, Jo At Lee who was very dear to so many of us, passed on this past week. Although she and Bill haven’t been able to get to Saint Nicholas for a couple of years, every year around Christmas time our middle schoolers would go to their house and sing Christmas carols for them. We

did this in part because Jo had sung professionally when she was younger and loved to hear the youngsters singing carols. Kathy pointed out to me an illustration from the very end of “Choosing Civility” that I’d like to share with you.

“I was on a train on a rainy day...For some reason I became intent on watching the raindrops on the window. Two separate drops, pushed by the wind, merged into one for a moment and then divided again – each carrying with it a part of the other. Simply by that momentary touching, neither was what it had been before. And as each one went to touch other raindrops, it shared not only itself, but what it had gleaned from the other. I saw this metaphor many years ago and it is one of my most vivid memories. I realized then that we never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace. Our state of being matters to those around us, so we need to become conscious of what we unintentionally share so that we can learn to share with intention.”¹

“We never touch people so lightly that we do not leave a trace.” Jo At Lee shared herself with us and especially with our young people in ways that made an enormous impression on all of us and none of us will ever be the same. Jo was a gentle, courtly woman with a strong sense of what was right and how things should be done. She paid attention. She was full of wonderful stories. She brought out what was hidden. Her treasure was as old as scripture and as new as the love story she created with Bill, her husband of 67 years. She was part of the Kingdom of Heaven as we live into it here at Saint Nicholas. And today heaven’s choir has a new soloist. May God be praised. Amen.

¹ Forni, P.M. *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct*. (2002) NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, p. 184-185.