

P9A 2023 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 & Genesis 29:15-28

The kingdom of heaven is like a dandelion, that someone took and planted—on purpose!—in his yard. It was just one weed, but it spread over all the lawn and became a pollinator for all the bees. The kingdom of heaven is like glitter that a student took and glued to an art project until the entire house sparkled. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a comic book collector: on finding a signed first issue of Superman, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Now he's living in his parents' basement because he doesn't own anything except that comic book.

Those examples probably sound silly to us, but if we weren't so familiar with the mustard seed, the yeast, and the pearl, we might be better able to see that Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven yield bizarre and boundless results. The kingdom is more than just fertile; it's infectious. It's more than just valued: it's obsessively cherished. There is something disruptive, almost sneaky about the kingdom as Jesus describes it in these parables, and those who seek it are single-minded, even foolish.

Take the mustard seed: the more horticulturally-inclined among you might know that it is in fact *not* the smallest seed and it doesn't grow into a tree, which makes this story strange from the start. Mustard is useful—I won't tell you how often I find myself at Texas Hot Dogs ordering one with sauce and mustard. But it's also an invasive species—likely to take over more profitable crops. If you plant it on purpose you might end up with a field of mustard but no grain for bread to spread it on. Be careful: the kingdom of heaven doesn't just grow—it grows out of control.

At first we might think of the field of buried treasure and the pearl of great worth as smart investments for business-savvy entrepreneurs, but again, these parables are wilder than that. In Jesus' day, selling all one had didn't mean liquidating a stock portfolio, not when the majority of people had just enough for survival. They aren't making the kingdom an important part of life, or even making the kingdom the center of life. They are seeking the kingdom as their only way of life with the kind of zealous passion that would make their friends and family think they had lost their minds.

So if the kingdom of heaven is unpredictable; if from one small act it can create massive change or even chaos; if the kingdom upsets the status quo and confounds our expectations and intentions; if it inspires us to take foolish risks, to forgo prudence and responsibility; if the kingdom demands the kind of investment that leaves no time, energy, or resources for anything else...why in the world does Jesus tell us to seek the kingdom, and why do we so often pray *thy kingdom come*? The short answer to why we need the kingdom of heaven is that the kingdom

of humanity is a great big mess. Disruption and reprioritizing is necessary if our society values the wrong things and functions in unhealthy ways...and very often we do.

Let's take as an example our awful installment of Genesis for today. Laban asks Jacob what salary he wants for the work he is doing. Jacob wants his wages to buy Laban's daughter Rachel, his cousin, which he can do, because women were property. Maybe Jacob doesn't pick her entirely for her looks, but the author certainly wants us to know that Rachel is the pretty one while Leah...has nice eyes and good personality. Nothing wrong with a society where people are valued just for what's on the outside, right? So Jacob works for seven years to buy Rachel. But at the wedding, Laban sends Leah into what must have been a very dark tent. Maybe she's in on the plan; maybe she doesn't have a choice; maybe Laban thinks he's doing something good for the daughter nobody else wants to marry—or maybe he's trying to get rid of her. In the morning, Jacob is pretty mad that he's been tricked. We could almost feel bad for him, if we forget that he tricked his blind, dying father into thinking he was his brother in order to get the better blessing. Laban tries to claim he hasn't been deceptive: it's not the way we do things here to let the younger sisters marry before the older sisters. Surely that never causes any strife between siblings. But Laban has a solution: if Jacob sleeps with Leah for a week, then he can work another seven years to buy her sister...and eventually he'll get both Rachel and Leah's slaves, too, who will be forced into this mess as the sisters spend the rest of their lives using their children and their slaves' children to fight over status. That's biblical marriage for you.

This story is an extreme example, and we have come a long way since most of the world would consider these kinds of family dynamics normal. But we still don't treat every other person we meet like they're made in the image of God, and we certainly don't always get treated that way by others. If we can't see the dehumanizing aspects of our society, it's not because they're not there; it's only because we are lucky enough to fall into some of the groups that don't get so readily pushed to the margins. We personally and collectively fail to live into the vision God has for the human community. Changing our deeply entrenched personal and communal behavior can feel so overwhelming, we may be tempted to give up before we even try. *That* is why it's good news that the itty bitty seeds of the kingdom sprout and grow beyond even the laws of nature; that a little bit of yeast hidden in some flour makes everything rise. Progress where we don't expect it; growth where we may not even want it, because we don't always want what's good for us and other; yet this is how the kingdom of heaven works. God is calling us to live into a very different kind of kingdom; may we learn to value it as a treasure of great worth, enough that we'll set aside whatever is keeping us from seeking it with everything we have.