

May 14, 2017
Matthew 13.24-52
Benjamin A. Loven

Today's scripture reading is filled with parables in which Jesus compares various things to the kingdom of heaven.

And it truly is a variety:

Wheat and pearls and weeds, oh my!

Yeast and fields and seeds, oh my!

So let's see where this yellow-brick road leads, shall we?

²⁴Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

This parable, the parable of the wheat and the weeds, sounds rather harsh.

The kingdom of heaven is compared to a field that includes both wheat and weeds. At the time of the harvest, the *weeds* will be collected *first*, bound together, and then burned.

While Jesus does emphasize that *both* the wheat *and* the weeds are left to grow together, there is a clear judgment given: the wheat is good and the weeds are bad. And there can only be one outcome for the weeds – fire.

On that happy note, let's move on to the next parable of the kingdom:

³¹Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it 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."

The famous mustard seed parable! We often explain this parable by lifting up the idea that it's about how a *teeny, tiny* seed grows into something **huge**, the greatest of all shrubs!

We then say that this is the way God works in the world and in our lives...God starts with something small, and then multiplies it beyond measure...

...but that's not actually the point of this parable.

Because, lest we get too solemn and serious, we need to remember what the mustard plant is...it's a -weed.

Hold on a minute, you might be thinking...didn't Jesus *just* tell us a parable about wheat and weeds, where he stated that the wheat was *good* and the weeds were *bad*?

Now, he's saying that the kingdom of heaven is *like* a weed!?! So weeds are *good* now?

And the mustard shrub isn't *just* any old weed; it's an invasive species! Even one small seed can unleash an avalanche of shrubs, quickly overwhelming the native plant life, choking out everything else!

And *this* destructive ecological disaster is what Jesus compares the kingdom of *heaven* to...

³³He 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."

I guess Jesus must have thought that if *one* parable about an organism spreading out, contaminating the whole system was good, well then *two* parables about that would be even better!

Jesus continues down the path that he started in the mustard seed parable; the yeast quickly *infects* the whole batch of flour. Just one little bit of yeast is enough to leaven the *entire* mixture.

Talk about, “Going viral.”

³⁴Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth to speak in parables;

I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

After a brief interruption from those two other parables, Jesus now explains the *first* parable, about the wheat and weeds.

Now the weeds are *bad* again!

And Jesus doubles down on his ferocity: “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,

and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

So which is it, Jesus? Are the weeds the offspring of the evil one, the causes of sin and evildoers that will be collected and thrown into a furnace of fire...or are the weeds the kingdom of heaven, that rolling tide of invasive mustard shrubs?

And what's *this* line all about: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father?” *No* one talks like this, not even *Jesus*. What in the world is going on here?

“Let anyone with ears listen!” We're listening alright, Jesus, but we're not quite sure what it is we're supposed to be hearing!

⁴⁴The 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.

⁴⁵Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;
⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

With the addition of these two parables, we've gone from simple confusion to utter ridiculousness! The righteous (whatever that means) *might* be 'shining like the sun,' but how are they supposed to survive without any money?

I'm not sure being as shiny as Tamatoa will help with paying for car repairs, or making payments on medical bills or, taking care of aging parents, or, I don't know, *eating* if we've sold *everything* just to buy one random field we happened to bury some hidden treasure in...

⁴⁷Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Well, I guess even though we sold *everything* in the last parable, *now* we at least get to eat, some fish, but what, exactly, makes a fish good or bad?

And why throw the 'bad' fish on the fire...don't we *want* our fish to be grilled? I mean, grilling makes *any* meat taste way better, so why wouldn't we put the *good* fish on the fire?

⁵¹Have you understood all this? They answered, "Yes."

Really? The disciples have really understood *all* these contradictory, confusing, and ridiculous things Jesus has been comparing the kingdom of heaven to?

I'm not buying it. And soon enough, the disciples *will* show Jesus that they *haven't* understood him at all.

Jesus will soon tell them not once, not twice, but *three* times that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and *each* time he tells them, they will understand less and less.

Jesus will soon walk on the water, and when Peter goes out to join him, Peter will get frightened and sink beneath the waves.

Jesus will soon field a request from James and John, to make them the chief disciples, setting off an argument among *all* of the disciples about which one of them is the greatest.

Clearly, the disciples do *not* understand all these things about the kingdom of heaven.

But neither do we. Jesus tells us all these things, and they are confusing, and contradictory, and trying to reason out a thread that weaves them all together is impossible.

And that's exactly the point. God's kingdom is too big for us to be able to grasp what it means. It's too much for us to handle. It's too radical for us to deal with.

We can't understand it.

But the good news is that we don't *have* to understand it.

In all of these parables, Jesus is trying to tell us what the kingdom of heaven is *like*.

But the truth is, that Jesus himself *is* the kingdom!

Jesus himself *is* God's reign, here right now, *and* stretching throughout eternity!

Jesus himself came to bring God's kingdom near to us.

He does this by promising us that nothing, in all of creation, could ever separate us from God's love for us.

Neither death nor life;

Neither the struggles of today nor the anxieties of the future;

Neither powers nor governments;

Neither joys nor sorrows;

Neither doubts nor fears;

Nothing can ever separate us from God's love for us. ...*Nothing*...

This is God's kingdom, which has come near to us in Jesus.

And Jesus brings it for us even though we can't understand it, even though it is too much for us to handle, even though it pushes us beyond our comfort zones.

God's kingdom isn't about *us*...it's about what God has *done* for us, in our weakness, in our confusion, in our fear.

But in the meantime, what do we do about these pesky parables?

Wheat and pearls and weeds, oh my!

Yeast and fields and seeds, oh my!

What do we do? We laugh.

That's really what Jesus is doing by telling his disciples these parables; he's poking them, teasing them, trying to help them see how ridiculous it is for them to try to *understand* the infinite.

He wants them to laugh!

And that sounds like a good idea to me!