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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

TREASURE MAP

Imagine Jesus telling us a parable like this: the kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted a dandelion seed in her yard. It is a tiny seed but when it is grown it becomes the most beautiful and prized flower in the garden.

Of course, we can see what a ridiculous story this is. No one would intentionally plant a weed like dandelion in their yard. Instead of being prized, dandelions are hated and gardeners do their best to kill them and remove them.

But this is effectively what Jesus was saying in his parable about the mustard seed. All these centuries later, we hear this parable and we think it is simply a nice story about how small things yield great and wondrous results. But those listening to Jesus long ago would have immediately recognized the absurdity of Jesus' parable. Mustard bushes were invasive weeds. No one would intentionally plant them in their field. And they did not grow up to be the greatest of trees. Jesus was making an allusion to another passage of scripture from Ezekiel about the mighty cedar tree and how the birds of the air would nest in its branches. But instead of something noble like a cedar tree, Jesus chooses the lowly, invasive, mustard bush to teach about the kingdom of heaven. The parable was absurd.

These kingdom parables that Jesus tells in our passage today sound innocent and reassuring to our ears today, but to those who were listening to Jesus long ago, these stories would have been shocking, jarring, unsettling, even offensive. In the first parable about the mustard seed, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a weed that takes over everything. Then he compares the kingdom of heaven to a woman who mixes yeast into a ridiculously huge

amount of flour. It was apparently enough flour to feed a hundred people. Bread making is such a comforting activity to us today. In fact, it is so comforting that in these days of the pandemic so many people have turned to making bread that yeast is almost impossible to find. But in Jesus' day, leaven was considered unclean, even corrupting.

Then we hear Jesus tell two parables comparing the kingdom of heaven to valuable treasures. We hear about an accidental discovery of a treasure found in a field and another one about someone discovering a very beautiful pearl. And upon finding these valuable items, both characters make a rash and extreme decision to sell everything they have, *everything*, to acquire the treasure.

These last two parables made me think of a story in the news recently. Ten years ago, an antiquities dealer and author buried a treasure chest in the New Mexico wilderness. He filled it with more than a million dollars of gold nuggets, rare coins, and valuable ancient artifacts. And then he wrote and published a poem with clues for finding the chest. Over the decade, hundreds of thousands of treasure seekers scoured the American southwest in search of this treasure. Many quit their jobs to dedicate themselves to the search and others depleted their life savings. News reports indicate that at least 4 people died in their search for the treasure. Finally, last month, the treasure chest was found by a person who chooses to remain anonymous.

That same kind of passion, that same kind of motivation, is what we hear in the parables Jesus tells about the treasure in the field and the pearl of great beauty. The characters have a passionate drive to get the treasure. However, the underlying message Jesus is teaching is having a passion not about finding the hidden money but about a passion for finding the hidden treasure of the kingdom of God.

That is something all these parables share in common. In all these parables the kingdom of God is not readily apparent. Maybe it is there in plain view but we just don't recognize it because it comes in unlikely forms or people. Or maybe the kingdom of God is hidden from our sight and takes effort and commitment to discover.

Our lives have been so greatly disrupted and altered by the coronavirus. The pandemic has completely disordered our lives and our world. And we all crave a return to order. That's only natural. But one of the things we learn from Jesus' parables is that the kingdom of God is wildly disordered. It doesn't come in ways or forms that are orderly or predictable. Like an invasive weed, it is out of our control. Like the activity of yeast, it is mysterious, corrupting of our ordered lives, and unmanageable. So what if, what if this disordered time of pandemic is the ideal time to look for the disorderly presence of the kingdom of God? What if the treasure of the kingdom of God is found in the most unlikely of people or places or circumstances but we could miss it if we didn't look? Maybe it is found in people doing important acts of kindness. Or in those leading us by their example in practicing forgiveness, extending compassion, standing up for justice. What if it is found in parts of town or in places of our world we have dismissed as beyond hope? What if it were found in the person with whom we most disagree or in the person we find most disagreeable?

On the other hand, what if the kingdom of God is a treasure found within ourselves—a treasure waiting to be discovered? The treasure of love, a love even for our enemies. The treasure of patience. The treasure of forgiveness for yourself and for others. The treasure of gratitude. The treasure of righteous anger that leads to action. The treasure of sacrifice—of doing what is convenient or prudent on behalf of another.

The writer Annie Dillard tells about a time when she was six or seven years old when she would hide her precious pennies along a stretch of sidewalk near her house. She would lay her coins at the roots of a tree or in a crack in the sidewalk, and then she would take a piece of chalk and draw huge arrows leading to the pennies. She would write, “Surprise ahead,” or “Money this way.” She writes, “I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe.” (From, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*)

Annie Dillard’s story strikes me as a parable Jesus would love to tell. Imagine thinking of pennies as a treasure! Pennies are considered so worthless that there is talk of taking them out of circulation altogether. Most of us wouldn’t even take the time to bend down and pick up a penny. Can’t you hear how Jesus could turn this into a parable? The kingdom of heaven is like a little girl who hid pennies along a sidewalk. A passerby, finding 3 of those pennies, rejoiced and celebrated upon discovering such treasure.

I think the parables Jesus tells us today are like the arrows Annie Dillard drew on the sidewalk to direct people to the hidden treasure. These little parables are treasure maps. They are arrows pointing us in the right direction, with signs stating: “Surprise this way!” and “Treasure to be found!” They open our eyes to where the kingdom of God is to be found in the people and places and circumstances we would ordinarily overlook, to the capacities in ourselves we might not recognize.

Today may seem like an ordinary day to you and to me. But Jesus reminds us that there is treasure to be found out there. The kingdom of God offers us free gifts from the universe and they are waiting to be discovered in this ordinary day. I take comfort that even in the midst of these heavy and hard days of the pandemic, even in the face of social upheaval and injustice,

God's unexpected treasures are there to be found. And like a weed or like yeast, God's realm lies beyond our control to manage or contain. No amount of evil or hardship can destroy the presence of God's realm. Jesus invites us on a treasure hunt—to seek the kingdom of God among us and within us, to join in the activity of the kingdom of God like a woman mixing yeast, to seek for God's hidden presence in our daily lives, until that moment when we discover that we have become a part of God's wonderful treasure for others.