

July 24, 2011: The Parables of the Kingdom

A few weeks ago, Jim and I visited an old friend of his. The two of them, for 40 years, have spoken “pun” to each other. The puns just roll, non-stop, off their tongues, and, try as I would, I couldn’t get into their conversation. As we sat together at dinner, they may as well have been speaking Russian or Arabic.

That’s how it is with the language of the Spirit: It’s as different from the language of rationality, reasonability, and even religion, as English is from Chinese!

Today’s scripture reading shows Jesus at a turning point. He’d tried to engage his contenders with their own language of logic, reason, debate, and even scriptural proof. It’s that language that dots all the “i”s, wraps things up, closes the book, smugly declares “that settles that”, and goes away unmoved or unchanged.

But after today, says Matthew, he will speak to them “only in parables”. Why? Because his earnest words are falling on deaf ears, closed minds, and cold hearts.

He sees that only those whose hearts are open, soft, and warm, will listen and hear and “get it.” Or at least they’ll get that they don’t get it, which is enough, because the language of parables is the language of the Spirit, which is the language of the heart, and, if you let it speak there, it will open your heart, stretch your heart, ease your heart, embolden your heart, or wizen your heart, which are things the heart wants so much more than *answers*.

And he sees that he can’t open closed hearts, anyway, so he focuses on hearts that can hear, hearts very much like yours.

Let’s use those hearts to look at these now parables and see how they might work upon them.

The country of Heaven is like a mustard seed sown in a field, a tiny seed that becomes a great tree, so all kinds of birds will come and nest there.

What does this say about the country of Heaven?

That it can begin small, but have huge, and hidden, potential for growth. That it’s self-renewing. You don’t need to keep planting it; it will plant itself as it sends its seeds on the wind to new soil. And it’s roomy and welcoming. It doesn’t select or exclude certain kinds of “birds” but welcomes them all.

What is the mustard seed in your life? It might be an idea, a dream, a talent, a small act of forgiving, a small, secret hurt. It’s so small and humble, you might say, “This little thing? What good could it be?” and just ignore it or toss it out.

Or you could plant it in the garden of your soul, water it with love, and see what grows. Whatever it is, it has the potential to expand you, open you, stretch you. What is the mustard seed in your life?

"The country of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

You should know that three measures of flour would be 80 pounds of it, yielding, with the right amount of water, 100 pounds of dough!

What does that say about the reign of God?

That it needs to be worked on, hard. It needs to be activated. It needs work, water, warmth. But it also needs to be left alone, covered, set aside, trusted, and waited for.

What is the leaven in your life? Whatever it is, it's life itself, like yeast is alive. And it's ordinary, close at hand, and, with the right help from you, will grow into something warm, and large, and nourishing and delightful.

What is the leaven in your life?

"The country 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."

What does this tell us about the reign of God?

That it's precious, and its value is obvious, immediately recognizable. That it's beautiful. That it comes as surprise. That *it* may find *you*! That it brings great joy and it costs everything. Really, everything.

What is the treasure waiting to be found by you, claimed by you, bought by you with everything you have? A new work, or love, or freedom? Are you ready for it? How will you know it? What "field" will come with it? What is the "everything" you'll need to let go, in order to possess it?

What is the treasure waiting for you?

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

What does that tell us about the reign of God?

That it involves a search, a long, hungry search, for something lovely, beautiful, worth all you've got.

What is that pearl for you? What have you been looking for your whole life? Are you brave enough to admit how much you want it? Are you able to wait for it, search for it? How far will you let your search take you? How much are you willing to give up for it?

What, for you, is the pearl of great price?

"Again, the country 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."

What does that tell us about the reign of God?

That it's huge, gathering, embracing. It holds the good and the bad together, at least for awhile and the sorting is in God's hands.

What's in your net? What's the rotten, smelly, useless stuff you'd like to get rid of but amongst which might be hidden the good, useful precious stuff? How could you bring your whole net ashore, your whole self, all the stuff in your life and heart and give it to God to sort out?

What's in your net?

And then, finally, this parable: *"Every scribe who has been trained for the country of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."*

God is hiding in these old parables, but in the new parables of our own lives, as well. In our struggles, doubts, questions, riddles, and all the dailiness of our ordinary lives. We can train ourselves to look for God, not in the "experts", nor at the high altars, nor in gurus or popes or solemn prayer or exquisite liturgy, but in the simple parables of life.

Yesterday, while visiting my friend out in the country, her frog came home. This frog had lived in her pond for five years, which is a long lifespan for a frog! Nancy and the frog had become friends, truly. He allows her to pet and hold him, as she coos and smiles at him. The frog disappeared during a storm several weeks ago, and we have been praying for his return ever since. When he leaped past me and loudly plopped into the water, I went screaming the good news to Nancy. Then we just communed with and enjoy "Freddie," who swam to our edge of the pond and listened as we rejoiced and exclaimed over his homecoming.

I have learned to mine these events for how God is present in them, and, in this one I was reminded that the country of heaven is like getting back some precious thing you thought you'd lost forever, and that it will always surprise you, leaping into your life in its own time, and bringing to you the gift of a breathtaking intimacy with something or someone whom God lovingly made.

Watch for the parables in your own lives because God is hidden within them. Look for God there, seek God there, and you will find God, right there.