

The kingdom of heaven is like...

In the chapters between last week's text and this morning's, we see Jesus in action. He moves in and out of different communities giving sight to the blind, restoring lepers, and healing women and girls and servants. He calls Matthew the tax collector and sends the twelve out to do his work, warning them that not everyone will welcome the message they bring. John the Baptist's disciples seek Jesus out and ask if he really is the one they have been waiting for. He extends a welcome to all who are weary, promising rest for their souls. And he begins to rankle the powers that be with his insistence on revealing the life that the Law was always intended to offer. He does not stop his disciples from plucking grains to eat on the Sabbath, and then he marches into the synagogue and heals a man with a withered hand, insisting that healing is never out of bounds. In response, Matthew tells us that "the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."¹ He makes claims that further upset the scribes and the Pharisees, as well as his own family. And then he begins to tell parables. [Read Matthew 13:31-34]

A recent study revealed that in the wake of fake news, people have a difficult time trusting what they read online. According to a report I read online—yes, I get the irony:

59% of consumers think visual information is more important than textual information across all consumer categories...[and] close to 60% of respondents think images are more trustworthy than text.²

We want to be able to see, to imagine, to picture what it is we're being asked to buy or buy into. We need help imagining and picturing not only a new pair of jeans or vacation destinations, but we need help imagining what exactly the kingdom of heaven might look like. Our ancestors needed that help, too, because this kingdom is unlike any they have seen before. So Jesus tells parables, "picture stories," as one translation reads. Jesus paints pictures, not with a smartboard, or Pixar-like animation, or Snapchat filters, or even oils or pastels. Instead through his words, he conjures up images, many images to try convey what this kingdom-come-near is and what his bringing it near is all about.

When I picture a kingdom, if I'm honest the image is probably some combination of Cinderella's castle, the grounds of Windsor Castle in England, the fictional landscape of Genovia from the *Princess Diaries* movies, and

¹ Matthew 12:14, NRSV

² <https://www.mediavillage.com/article/when-it-comes-to-search-pictures-more-trusted-than-text/>

Buckingham Palace as depicted on Netflix in *The Queen* thrown in for good measure. When we picture the kingdom of heaven, we may be inclined to imagine pearly gates with lots of gold and some clouds with angels singing in the background. I think it is safe to say that neither yeast, nor a mustard seed has anything to do with our pictures of the kingdom of heaven. And we're not alone. I think it is also safe to argue that the first hearers of Jesus' parables would scratch their heads at these images, too.

While Jesus explains some parables, he does not explain the mustard seed or the woman's hiding the yeast in the flour, leaving his first hearers and us to try to make sense of them. Some scholars insist that leaven and mustard seed are unclean according to Jewish law and that Jesus is revealing his renegade ways by equating such things with something sacred. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine disagrees. In her writing on the parables, she makes an extensive case to insist that:

No one in the culture of [Jesus'] time, whether Jewish or pagan, regarded either mustard or leaven as a bad thing. Each had a great utilitarian value; each was commonly available; each brought good things to those who served it.³

Huh. So if the parable is not a puzzle layered with complex, hidden meanings that I have to work to tease out, if the images of bread starter and a seed and some birds in the branches of a shrub are not secret clues that I have to unlock, what kind of kingdom could Jesus be describing? Could he be trying to say that THE kingdom of heaven is akin to mundane, everyday things we see all the time? But what about the harps or the clouds or the pearly gates?

Levine wants us to see more in these pictures than simply mundane images or grand puzzles to be solved and settled. She pushes us to imagine how these pictures of the kingdom of heaven might inform how we live in and among this world here and now, this place where Jesus tells us the kingdom has come near. She insists that these parables teach us that some things:

...need to be *left alone*. Keep fiddling with the dough and it will not rise; keep exposing the seed to air and it will not germinate... We are part of a larger process... sometimes we need to *get out of the way*. We are not always the focus; sometimes we are the facilitator of something bigger than ourselves.⁴

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper One, 2014) 181.

⁴ Levine, 182.

The woman hides the yeast in the dough—enough dough to make bread for hundreds of people; three measures of flour is somewhere between forty and sixty pounds of flour. The one who sowed the seed instigates the sprouting of a bush that shelters scores of birds, but he does not make the shrub grow. Nor does the bread rise or the shrub grow in a snap. The abundance of food and shelter emerges over a span of time; they cannot be rushed; to witness them in their full potential requires patience, a faithful and persistent patience and trust that something good will come of these seemingly inconsequential things. Levine also insists that the parables teach us that:

The kingdom of heaven is found in what...we might call ‘our own backyard’ in the generosity of nature and in the daily working of men and women...[She writes,] The kingdom of heaven is present when humanity and nature work together, and we do what we were put here to do—to go out on a limb to provide for others, and ourselves as well.⁵

So the message is straightforward but not simple. Like a “choose your own adventure” story, we might be called to hear different things, to respond in multiple ways to the kingdom’s calling at different times. There will be days when we need to hear the word about trusting the yeast of the kingdom to rise without our help. There will be days when we need to hear the call to plant a seed and get out of the way so that something good, something holy, something bigger than our own wildest dreams can grow. And there will be days when we are called to open our eyes to see and name the pictures of the kingdom God is drawing before our eyes right now.

So what do you see? For just a moment, close your eyes and imagine how you would finish the sentence, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”

Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is like Candice Payne, a woman in Chicago who anonymously used her credit card to pay for 20 homeless people to spend the night in a hotel during the recent severe cold snap. Others heard about her impulsive generosity and dug deep to get 60 rooms for men and women to find shelter in sub-zero temperatures.⁶

Perhaps the kingdom of heaven can be compared to John Fox, a man who stopped his car to try and save a stranger who had been hit by a car on Union Deposit Road. With vague memories of CPR training from his Boy Scout days, Fox started chest compressions and managed to keep her alive until she could be cared for by emergency

⁵ Levine, 182.

⁶ <https://www.thv11.com/article/news/nation-world/meet-the-chicago-woman-who-rented-hotel-rooms-for-the-homeless-during-deep-freeze/285-06f8f21a-e4b0-463a-904b-f3b74f440234?fbclid=IwAR10vwWRZCJA3Bc1XIDZDZuLaxM12MwbFSuZJmgeXMnO5ea8wF8Irc18Nu0>

personnel. Once she left in the ambulance, Fox wondered and worried, praying that Elaine Pendleton would be ok. When he heard that she had died, his heart sank, and he began trying to track down her family. As it turns out they were trying to track him down, too. He wanted to pay for Elaine's funeral. They wanted to thank the stranger who had risked his life to try and save hers.⁷

Or maybe it looks like a neighborhood in Newton, Massachusetts where a two-year old named Samantha lives. Samantha is deaf and loves to have conversations with anyone who will talk with her, but she only speaks American Sign Language. Her neighbors do not know ASL, or they didn't. As a reporter says, "You cannot expect an entire neighborhood to learn sign language; you can only appreciate it when they do." The neighbors took it upon themselves to hire a teacher, and the entire neighborhood is now immersed in learning how to talk with Samantha, and Samantha is thriving. Samantha's mother describes it as "shocking and beautiful."⁸

Like a bit of yeast hidden in a ridiculous amount of flour, like one tiny seed sown in the middle of a field, Jesus' picture stories unsettle everything we expect to see, upend our idea of what is holy, and shift our misguided notions of where the kingdom of heaven is found. In this kingdom Jesus describes, there is abundant shelter and plentiful food, enough for a feast, enough for all. In this kingdom Jesus describes, ordinary human beings are the agents of extraordinary abundance and generosity. In this kingdom Jesus describes men and women go out on a limb. In this kingdom Jesus describes, we begin to see the picture he wants to paint with us, a beautiful and shocking picture of what the God of the universe is working to usher in even now, even when it can be hard to see, maybe especially when it can be hard to see.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2019/02/man-who-tried-to-save-grandmother-hit-by-car-surprises-family-by-paying-for-funeral.html?fbclid=IwAR0dxdHm-16hyUkqYOnOUVUjc9tMVKUXj-7bCxZwYDiQ-PPhs5ZXpGzyx8Y>

⁸ <https://cbsn.ws/2lhp9pd>