

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT THINGS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1935, C.H. Dodd, a prominent Protestant theologian and New Testament scholar from Wales, published a book called *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Dodd's book was revolutionary in his approach to understanding these seemingly simple stories that Jesus used to teach people about the kingdom of God. C.H. Dodd is known for emphasizing what is called "realized eschatology." If you're not at all familiar with that term, listen to what Jesus said in his first words in his public ministry in the Gospel of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) "Realized eschatology" is the idea that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is a present reality and not just "out there somewhere in the future."

C.H. Dodd's classic definition of a parable reminds us that these stories Jesus told are not just entertaining and comforting stories, wrapped up at the end with a nice, little, easily understood moral that will make life more comfortable and prosperous. Dodd said, "At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."¹ I thought about Dodd's definition as I read the question Jesus asks his hearers as he finishes with his parables in Matthew 13, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes!" That can also be translated, "Yes indeed! Certainly!" And I wondered, "Really?" And I could hear Jesus saying to them and to us, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Two weeks ago we heard "The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who went out to sow." Last week we heard "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field." Today we hear "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast" and "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls." That's two ways of looking at things.

First, the mustard seed and the yeast.

The landscape work continues at 164 Friendly Drive. The old zoysia grass and dollar weeds have been scraped and carted off. New dirt has been brought in and made ready for a new planting of centipede grass. The landscaper told us he would need to buy seed to cover approximately 9,500 square feet. According to my research, that means about five pounds of centipede seed. Have you ever wondered how many seeds are in a one pound bag of grass seed? I'm so glad you asked! Approximately 450,000 seeds! So we will have about 2,250,000 seeds sown in our front yard. That's a lot of seeds!

But the someone in today's story sowed one — count it, ONE! — mustard seed in his field. A mustard seed is only about 1-2 mm big or, as Matthew tells us, “the smallest of all the seeds.” Why would anybody go to the trouble of planting just one seed in his field? And, to make things more puzzling or, as C.H. Dodd put it, “leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought,” the mustard bush is an invasive weed. In last week's story, the landowner's enemy came under cover of night and sowed weeds among the good seeds. In this story, someone intentionally plants an invasive weed that can quite literally take over your field. It might not technically be a “tree,” but the mustard weed bush can grow to be 8-10 feet tall.

Jesus tells such strange stories. If he was going to teach about the kingdom of heaven, wouldn't it have been much more impressive to use the kind of image the prophet Ezekiel used? The choicest cedar twig planted on a high and lofty mountain that becomes a noble cedar of Lebanon and bears fruit and provides shelter for winged creatures of every kind. (Ezekiel 17:22-24) Instead, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a tiny seed of an invasive weed. What gives? Hold that thought until we hear about the yeast in the flour.

As I shared with the children, I like to make pizza dough from scratch. I use a recipe for a single dough ball from a cookbook Nancy gave me as a surprise Christmas present a few years ago. The recipe makes just enough dough for a nice-sized pizza for the two of us. She also gave me a digital scale so my measurements would be precise (as the recipe calls for). The dough recipe is very simple — water, fine sea salt, white flour, and yeast. Measuring the water, salt, and flour is not a problem. But how do you measure 1/10 of 1/4 teaspoon of yeast? After some failed pizza crusts, I actually measured out one teaspoon of yeast, divided that into ten neat little piles, and memorized how much yeast I needed (I don't think it even makes a pinch!). If my calculations are right, the yeast in the pizza dough accounts for .0004% of the flour mixture. But that's the thing about yeast. It's minuscule and dissolves in water and you can't see it anymore, but if you leave it out, you might as well eat a piece of cardboard.

The woman in this story uses 50 pounds of flour, enough to make 100 loaves of bread. Even so, that wouldn't require a large amount of yeast. But here's the thing. The yeast she used wasn't Fleischmann's Instant Dried Yeast in the triple strips of yellow, blue, and red packets. Instead, she probably used leaven, which probably was something like a moldy piece of leftover bread. In fact, in the Old Testament, leaven is often used as a symbol for sin and uncleanness. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians about sin, he said, “Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch as you really are unleavened.” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7) Again, what gives, Jesus?

In the coming weeks and months, people who ride by 164 Friendly Drive are going to see a **bunch** of dirt and a couple of new flower beds. They won't see a lush green lawn of centipede grass. But that doesn't mean nothing is happening. When the pizza dough is sitting on the kitchen counter wrapped in plastic wrap for several hours, it looks like nothing is happening. But that doesn't mean nothing is happening. The grass seed is germinating. The yeast fungus is eating sugar and putting out carbon dioxide,

ethanol, flavor molecules, and energy. Eventually those tiny seeds and yeast cells will produce some grand things, but you'd never know it just by looking at the process. And so it is with the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. You might not always see God's kingdom at work right here and now, but rest assured, there's a lot going on, and some grand things are happening.

That's one way of looking at things. Now for another way . . .

We could get hung up on the ethics and morality of the tenant farmer plowing the field who accidentally stumbled upon a treasure someone had hidden in the field. The good and proper thing would have been to let the landowner know. Instead, the plowman reburied it, hurried off and sold all that he had, and bought the land.

Jesus' example might offend our concept of right and wrong and fair-play, but that's not really the point of the parable. Instead, it's the man's reaction to what he found. He knew the value of the treasure and he did everything he could to keep it. Remember - Jesus isn't talking about a literal treasure buried in the ground, but about the kingdom of heaven. So can't you hear Jesus' words from his Sermon on the Mount? "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The treasure of the kingdom of heaven is in your midst, Jesus says. Where are your hearts?

The pearl merchant apparently knew what he was looking for, he just hadn't found it yet. But when he did find "one pearl of great value," he went and sold all that he had and bought it. We can assume "all that he had" must have been his inventory of pearls — nothing wrong with those gems, but they weren't **the one!** And when he found the one, the merchant, like the plowman in the field, did whatever it took to make sure he had the pearl of great value.

St. Augustine famously wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you." That's inspiring and comforting, but even moreso when you consider the backstory. Augustine spent his youth trying to find fulfillment in all sorts of pursuits — as one person put it, in "excessive pleasures, false religions, philosophy, dissipation and distractions." In his book *Confessions*, Augustine describes his younger life in Carthage this way: "I badly wanted to love something. I had no liking for the safe path without pitfalls, for although my real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul, I was not aware of this hunger. I felt no need for the food that does not perish, not because I had had my fill of it, but because the more I was starved of it, the less palatable it seemed. Because of this my soul fell sick."²

Even after his famous conversion experience, Augustine worried that he might be like people "who have the knowledge of God, but do not honour him or give thanks to him as God." Augustine confessed, "I had fallen into this error also . . . I had already found the pearl of great value and I ought to have sold all that I had and bought it. But I still held back."³

Perhaps you've heard the fable of the chicken and the pig who were walking down the road one day. The chicken said, "Hey, pig, I was thinking we should open a restaurant!" Pig was interested and said, "Maybe, but what would we call it?" "How about Ham-and-Eggs?" chicken asked. Immediately pig said, "No way!" Surprised, the chick-

en asked, “Why not? What’s the matter with Ham-and-Eggs?” Pig said, “Well, I’d be committed but you’d only be involved.”

When it comes to the life of faith and the cost of discipleship, you might hear people these days ask, “Are you a fan or a follower of Jesus?” In other words, are you committed or just involved?

So, there you have it, two ways of looking at things — different, but complementary.

The kingdom of heaven will infiltrate our lives and spread beyond anything we can imagine. The kingdom of heaven is more powerful than we might be willing to believe and accept. God’s power let loose is bound to turn our lives upside down and inside out. The kingdom of heaven is more valuable than anything else and calls for our single-minded pursuit and ultimate allegiance. If we have ears to hear and hearts to trust, God’s power at work in our lives and in the world will shape our lives so we will seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness in all that we do.

As we leave Jesus’ parables in Matthew 13, let me share a poem by Andrew King, whose writing helps us listen and hear what Jesus is saying. It’s called “No Time Left for Waiting.”

*No time for spreadsheets,
for the accountant’s calculations.
No time for checking the agenda,
the meetings scheduled.
No time for the radio station’s
business headlines,
for Googling the financial news.
Let the other hunters continue
to dig on their various islands –
places you have tried before,
long through the soulless days,
the heartless nights –
today you have discovered
the riches you’ve been waiting for,
searching for,
you and the world waiting and searching,
your whole life.
No time for the rear-view mirror.
No time for the GPS to suggest
alternate routes that might
contain less risk or cost.
This is highest value; this is greatest treasure;
the pearl the world in its wisdom
has been diving for, coming up empty handed.
This is worth staking your day,*

*your path,
your life upon.
This is life itself.
It is the kingdom of heaven.
It is Christ, and the way
he teaches and gives.
It is the love of God for you
and for the aching, breaking,
yearning world.
No time left for waiting.
Come and buy the entire field.⁴*

Let us pray: O God, most of us really do want you to be the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the center of our lives. We really do want to hear your voice above all of the other voices in our lives. But we get bogged down in the daily routine. We forget who we are. We forget who you are. We forget what the church is supposed to be. Help us recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and in the world, that you would continue to challenge us, inspire us, and make us into the people you want us to be. Amen.

NOTES

¹C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 5.

²Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 55.

³*Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴Andrew King, A Poetic Kind of Place, "No Time Left for Waiting," at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com.