

## **“SEED, YEAST, TREASURE, PEARL”**

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

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Janet: I like those little mini-parables, don't you?

Jerry: They don't have much plot!

Janet: Well, no, but they have a seed, and yeast, and a treasure, and a pearl... which are all great things.

Jerry: They are.

Janet: There's something about the simplicity of just a single image that's kind of evocative and open-ended. It makes you think.

Jerry: I can see that. I like that Jesus doesn't say all that much about what each one means, only that "the kingdom of God is like this." You have to dig deeper. It's kind of fun to explore the images.

Janet: It seems to me that as much as these parables invite us to use our imagination, they also focus our attention.

Jerry: What do you mean?

Janet: Well, the kingdom of God is a big idea. Maybe too big to think about all at once. But a parable that is just an image directs our attention to one truth at a time.

Jerry: The kingdom is a big idea, but that first parable is kind of small!

Janet: True, mustard seeds are pretty small.

Jerry: They sure don't look like much.

Janet: Most seeds don't, but isn't it amazing to see what happens when they grow into beanstalks, or morning glories, or maple trees?

Jerry: About those mustard seeds, though: I'm sure the mustard plant is a lot bigger but there's no way it's the greatest of shrubs, let alone a tree!

Janet: Well, Jesus and his friends never saw sequoias! I don't know about the height, but I believe the mustard plants in that area were known to grow like crazy and spread like wildfire –

like kudzu in the southern United States. Or like the bittersweet vine that's trying to take over in our backyard!

Jerry: That doesn't sound like a good thing!

Janet: You know, plants we don't think much of *do* sometimes have an important role in an ecosystem – maybe providing habitat or food for beneficial insects. So perhaps part of the subtext is that the kingdom of heaven doesn't necessarily look like we expect. But I think the main focus of the parable must be on the growth – and the contrast between this insignificant looking seed and the sprawling plant it produces, even in a fairly harsh environment.

Jerry: There's something for us in that. What we're doing right now might not look like much: how we're adapting to new ways of doing things; the ways we are trying to care for each other and stay hopeful; the stuff we're doing to help our neighbors in need; the stands we take for justice; how we're learning to let go, and grieve, and be patient.... It's all tiny, in the scheme of things. At least it looks and feels tiny.

Janet: But we're sowing the seeds of the church's future.

Jerry: Or maybe *God* is sowing them in us.

Janet: Either way, that makes it a timely parable.

Jerry: What about the yeast?

Janet: Well, we sure did look at yeast differently this past spring! Everybody wanted to bake bread, and all the stores ran out of yeast!

Jerry: How much did you pay for this?

Janet: Too much!

Jerry: But the bread was delicious!

Janet: It was interesting to see something as simple as yeast suddenly become a precious commodity.

Jerry: You can't make French bread or cinnamon rolls without it!

Janet: It's as miraculous as a seed, really, how the tiny yeast organisms mixed into flour and water transform those ingredients – which are quite bland, really - into dough that stretches and rises, and then becomes this delicious-smelling bread when you bake it.

Jerry: So the point is a little bit different from the seed, isn't it? The yeast (that doesn't look like much) grows and makes the dough rise, but it's more about the way it can transform the other ingredients it's mixed with.

Janet: Hmm. I wonder if the idea is that Jesus puts the good news of the kingdom of heaven into us and changes us... or if we are the yeast and meant to mix in the world and be agents of transformation.

Jerry: Maybe both?

Janet: Maybe. With this pandemic and everything else that is going on, it's certainly become clear how very badly we - *and* our world - are in need of transformation.

Jerry: I love that the image Jesus uses to talk about the transformative power of the kingdom of God is yeast... dough ... bread. Because it's not an image of coercive power but of feeding, which of course is what Jesus himself did.

Janet: Real transformation of self involves nurturing the spirit. And real transformation of society involves nurturing people. What a fantastic idea!

Jerry: I think we need that reminder right now, when so much is going on that's NOT about nurturing our spirits *OR* feeding people.

Janet: And we also need the hope of rising bread right now – so we can remember that God is at work in us and in the world; transformation is happening even if we can't see the action.

Jerry: I agree; when we feel hopeless, or think that the world is falling apart, that's valuable message.

Janet: Valuable like that yeast!

Jerry: Speaking of valuable... the next parable is all about "valuable."

Janet: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."

Jerry: Funny that Jesus never says exactly *what* the treasure is.

Janet: You know what treasure makes me think of?

Jerry: No, what?

Janet: The *Antiques Road Show*, British version.

Jerry: (*to congregation*) One of the things we've been watching during the pandemic.

Janet: People bring their "treasures" to antiques experts, who explain to them just what it is they have and estimate its worth. You see a fascinating variety of things: furniture, toys, old tools, diaries, war medals, clocks, jewelry, pictures, bizarre knickknacks. Beautiful stuff ...and weird stuff.

Jerry: "Treasure" clearly means different things to different people.

Janet: Sometimes the items have been handed down through a family over several generations. But it's amazing how often the antique bronze sculpture was dug up in a backyard, or a painting unexpectedly found in an attic, or a beautiful necklace in a charity shop.

Jerry: Not unlike the treasure in the parable. The discovery of something wonderful and unexpected is a big part of the idea of "treasure," I think.

Janet: You know what has really struck me, though? Perhaps it's a particularly British attitude. But so often, when someone is told by the expert that the pin they inherited from their great aunt is genuine diamond and rubies, or the clock they fell in love with in a junk shop is worth £5,000, they say, "We won't be selling it. It'll stay in the family. We'll look after it." I love that notion of being caretakers of a precious object and its history.

Jerry: A sense of stewardship. Understanding the value of something and not looking to exploit it but to cherish it, and pass it on.

Janet: Do you suppose Jesus had anything like that in mind?

Jerry: I don't know, but it's not a bad way to think about what it means to say that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure. Our faith and our relationship with Christ isn't something to take for granted but something to cherish. We discover it, we learn to cherish it, and then we pass it on.

Janet: What about the pearl?  
How is that any different from the treasure?

Jerry: Well, it's specific, whereas we might all picture the treasure a little differently. And jewels like pearls have always been regarded as the definition of beauty. Could Jesus be saying something about the beauty and desirability of the kingdom of God?

Janet: The rabbis of Jesus' time referred to wisdom gained by studying scripture as a "pearl." (Sharp, p. 394)

Jerry: And the merchant is described as *seeking* that one fantastic, priceless pearl.

Janet: Ok; treasure suggests that the kingdom of heaven can surprise us, and then we have to decide what to do about that. The pearl, on the other hand, emphasizes the other side of the dynamic – our search for God.

Jerry: Like the song: "There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God."

Janet: But this parable sounds rather ... acquisitive – all about ownership. Don't we have a bit too much sense of "ownership" already? I don't mean just of stuff, but of the church, and the

earth, and our place in the scheme of things. Don't we often tend to think we own the truth, even?

Jerry: The parable does sound a bit like an endorsement of greedy individualism, at first, anyway. But in the end, it's really the opposite, isn't it? The pearl doesn't turn out to be a dazzling crown jewel for the merchant to wear and show off to everyone. I love this observation I read about this parable: "The moment of glimpsing and appreciating the value of the pearl is the same moment of releasing ownership of all other possessions to find meaning in a greater joy." (Sharp, p. 396)

Janet: That's essentially what Jesus says in other ways throughout the gospels: sell everything and follow me. Seek the kingdom of God first and above all. If you lose your life you save it.

Jerry: Every one of these parables in some way challenges us to see the kingdom of heaven – the presence and reign of God – as the greatest possible gift -

Janet: Even the seed and the yeast are, in their own way, precious things.

Jerry: And each one of these little images tries to catch us up in a sense of single-minded, whole-hearted purpose.

Janet: Tiny seeds grow into something big, transformation is happening, God's love is worth more than anything, Jesus asks us to follow him and give it our all.

Jerry: That's quite a lot for parables that have no plot!

Janet: They feel timely, though, don't they?

Jerry: Yeah, this feels like a time when ordinary things can teach us new truths,

Janet: And we are learning that we have to let go of some things we've held on to, for the sake of something more important.

Jerry: This is what it means to live in, and into, the kingdom of heaven.

Janet: That, and learning to see hints of God's presence - in seeds, in bread, in our treasures (whatever they may be), and in every little bit of beauty in the world.

Amen.

*Resources:*

Articles on Matthew 13:31-32, Matthew 33-35, and Matthew 13:44-46 by Thomas R. Steagald, Melinda McGarrah Sharp, Donald Senior in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, volume 1*, 2013, Westminster John Knox Press.