

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like ... *What?*”

A Jewish man was crossing the street in front of a Catholic Church, when he was struck by a passing vehicle. Inside the church, the priest heard the commotion, and rushed out to find the unfortunate man, lying in the street. Quickly, the priest knelt beside the man, and began to administer the last rites. “Do you believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?” the priest asked. The Jewish man simply moaned, and said, “I’m dying, and he asks me riddles?”

I tell you this story mostly because I like it. Other than that, it really has very little to do with anything else I’m going to say. Well, with the exception of one small thing:

One of the main components of Jesus’ message, was the fact that the kingdom of heaven — that community of men and women who seek to truly follow God’s will here on earth — that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. But when people would ask him about this kingdom, his answers were often in the form of parables. And parables, like those we heard this morning, are really a lot like riddles. You need to solve ’em to understand ’em.

However, scripture tells us that people often didn't understand Jesus' parables. Even though Jesus used imagery that they should have been familiar with, the deeper meaning of the parables often eluded his listeners.

We face the same problem, but even more so, because none of us have lived in the culture of first-century Palestine. And so, not only is it easy for us to miss the deeper meanings, but even the surface imagery that Jesus was using in his parables, are of things that we're often not entirely familiar with.

For example, in today's gospel reading, Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven — he likened that community of faith — (1) to a mustard seed, (2) to yeast, (3) to found treasure, (4) to a valuable pearl, and (5) to a fishing net. Chances are, most of us don't have a lot of experience with any of these things. Take me, for example:

I'm familiar with using *ground* mustard seed as a seasoning, but I've never tried planting a mustard seed, let alone trying to get it to grow.

Peggy and I generally purchase our bread already baked. But even those few times when

we tried baking it at home, we were using one of those bread making machines. So yeast is not something we're entirely familiar with.

I've never stumbled across a treasure in a field, or anywhere else for that matter.

I've never shopped for pearls, cheap or expensive. (Sorry, honey!)

And what little fishing I've done was always with a pole, and never with a net.

So I am as much in the dark, when it comes to figuring out what these parables mean, as were the people who actually heard Jesus telling them.

Now, sometimes Jesus would interpret the parables for the people, and sometimes he didn't. In today's gospel reading, he didn't, so we're left to our own devices to try and figure out what they mean. So, let's see what we can learn, with a little Q & A.

Q: Jesus, what's the kingdom of heaven like?

A: It's like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Or, it's like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

So, what do we learn from these two parables? Well, in a day and age when we like things bigger, faster, and flashier, we often forget that the *little* things in life can also have a great impact.

For example, a phone call to express sympathy over something bad that has happened, or to share joy over something good that has happened; that phone call is a small thing, but its effect can be powerful. Or, sending a note to someone you've not seen at church lately, is also a small thing with great potential.

You see, we don't always have to do something big to have a big impact in someone's life; and sometimes, it's the small things that matter most. And what's even better, if we're *all* attending to the small things, they have a way of coming together and becoming something much bigger than we could ever possibly have imagined.

Q: Jesus, what's the kingdom of heaven like?

A: It's 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.

Or, it's like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Have you ever come across something, that you realized that you absolutely needed, or even wanted, more than anything else? In the kingdom of heaven — in the community of faith — we find such things in abundance. And the things that we value above all else — and this may surprise you — are relationships. We value, above anything else, our relationship with God, and our relationships with each other.

I, for one, have received so much through the relationships in my life. I've received strength, encouragement, help, gentle correction, and guidance, to name but a few. And what's more, I've received as much from the youngest among us, as I have from the oldest. And I've receive as much from my church family as I have from my own family.

All of you, I know, value relationships as much as I do. But for me, the real beauty of the kingdom of heaven is that, this is the one of the few places on earth where we value relationships over almost anything else you can think of ... even over being right.

I think one of the greatest gifts you can give someone is the willingness to lose an argument for the sake of the relationship. That's true love, and you can find it in abundance in the kingdom of heaven.

But the really cool thing about the kingdom of heaven, becomes clear when we consider the last of the five short parables in today's gospel reading.

Q: Jesus, what's the kingdom of heaven like?

A: It's 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. So it will be at the end of the age.

Now, here, Jesus is describing a dragnet: it's a big net that's pulled behind a fishing boat, and which collects everything in its path. In other words, it's *very* indiscriminate, just like the kingdom of heaven. Because, in the kingdom, it doesn't matter

who you are, or what you've done, or where you've been. If you simply have a pulse and respiration, you're gathered into the kingdom. And that's good news because, whether I'm a "good" fish or a "bad" fish, I'm assured that I won't be turned away.

Now, there is an element of judgment at the end of this parable that needs to be addressed. When the fishing trip is concluded, and the haul is pulled ashore, the sorting begins. But here's a point that we need to keep in mind:

The fish themselves don't do any of the sorting. Only God, the fisherman, has that prerogative, and he won't even exercise that prerogative until much, much later.

So, what that means is that we will never find, included in the "job description" of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, anything that gives us the power, or the mandate, to discriminate.

Who could have imagined that the kingdom of heaven could be such a wonderful place? It's a place of amazing equality where, like the mustard seed and the small measure of yeast, the least among us carry the same weight as the greatest among us.

And, it's a place where we can find, like that found treasure, and that pearl of great value, the things that are of greatest value: each other.

And it's a place, like that dragnet, whose doors are always open, and wide enough to accommodate everyone.

And if you want to know more about the kingdom of heaven — and there *is* more to tell — I'm sure that Jesus would be more than willing to tell you another parable.

Amen.