

Matthew 13:31- 33, 44-55

He told then another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

He told them another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. “Yes,” they replied. He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

“Hidden Treasure”

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Matthew 13:44

The second step, in the twelve steps of the 1,500 year old Benediction spiritual way to inner freedom, is to know that God’s will is best for you. Joan Chittister wrote: The second step to inner freedom calls us to recognize that God’s will is best for us, whether we understand that will when we are faced with it or not. It is the awareness that God’s will for me---those circumstances over which I have no control—may at first seem bad for me but will, in the end, be for my good. Once we can stop exhausting ourselves with attempts to wrench the world to fit our fashion, we begin to see that what is before us in life is what we need to learn to live with, to appreciate, to grow with, to live beyond, if we are ever to be what we are capable of becoming. It reminds us that the God who is good wishes me well and not woe, that I am the dust God has destined for the stars. This second step says that the marrow of the spiritual life lies in learning to trust God who created you.

With rapid fire speed, Jesus shot the parabolic teachings about the kingdom of God out to his disciples, one right after the other. Here---catch this mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, fine pearl and net, and grasp something of God. Then without skipping a beat, Jesus asked the critical question, “Have you understood all these things?” And they said, “yes,” without batting an eyelash. I say, sure. To me, their yes felt like the one I gave to the John Deere delivery man when he gave me instructions on how to use our new tractor. “First you do this, then you do that, then before you can cut you have to lift this and stop that. Then he looked at me and said, “Did you get that” Without batting an eye, I said yes, knowing full well that each of the words he had said to me---choke, throttle, brake, gas pedal, gas tank, bagger needed my further consideration and thought.

Today's gospel reading consists of five parables. Each parable is brief, self-contained, told without any context, and contains the idea of the hiddenness of God. In "Seeds of Heaven" (p. 40), theologian Barbara Brown Taylor helps us understand why Jesus taught in parables. "One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about it. Someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do, and there are no words that are true enough, right enough, big enough to explain. You rummage around for something to say but everything sounds either too vague or too pious. You could talk about how your heart feels full to bursting sometimes, or about the mysterious sense of kinship you feel with other human beings. You could talk about how even the worst things that happen to you seem to have a blessing hidden in them somewhere, but the truth is that it is impossible to speak directly about holy things. How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God? We do not do it well, that is for sure, but because we must somehow try, we tend to talk about what we cannot say in terms of what we can—that is, we tend to describe holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trusting each other to make the connections. Believing in God is like coming home, we say, like being born again. It is like jumping off the high dive, like getting struck by lightning, like falling in love. We cannot say what it is, exactly, but we can say what it is like, and most of us get the message."

Back in the early part of July, Rev. John Nelson dug into the prophet Ezekiel's writings and found a hidden treasure concerning God's will for us. Ezekiel 36:26:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;
I will remove from you your heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh.

Then, after giving it more thought, he wrote the devotional, "Welcome Home," in which he told a story about a man who came to know the joy of knowing that God's will was best for him. He wrote: "In early 1993 a large group of Guatemalans, after nearly ten years of exile, had negotiated a return to their homeland. So in the dawn mists of January 20th, families

eagerly filled sixty large buses. Excited bodies pushing, filling seats, steaming up the windows closed tight against the morning chill. Belongings bundled in brightly woven cloth, or wide woven baskets. With a chorus of belching air brakes, the caravan headed south. One bus driver was not a fan. Not happy to be there. Seemed to think the refugees were troublemakers to start with, now getting attention they didn't deserve. Only there to do his job, less than thrilled at the cheering crowds lining the shoulders of the Pan American Highway. But something happened along the way. Maybe as the bus threaded the winding roads of Huehuetenango, through steep hills with terraced crops, men releasing their hoes to wave a greeting. Maybe along the cloud pass high above Solola, women with massive loads balanced gracefully on their heads slowly turning and raising their arms. Maybe as they passed the wide fields of Chimaltenango, filled with cabbage and broccoli and squash, children running alongside. Maybe it was the tears of the men and women inside the bus, faces pressed against the glass, scarcely daring to believe where they were going, what they were seeing. But when they got close to the capital city, where the throngs multiplied, the driver called to his passengers with his own tears running down his face: "Open the windows so your country can welcome you home!" It was what you might call an unintended consequence. An answer to prayer that no one had uttered: that one heart, closed hard, would open. That years of death and exile, years of planning and organizing at every level from dirt-floored jungle homes to marble lined halls of power, would answer an unspoken prayer on one bus out of sixty. Perhaps the kin-dom of God is like this: a beleaguered people, oppressed and exiled, return home to a teary welcome. And one driver travels from uncaring to compassion." (UCC Daily Devotional July 11, 2017) "Compassion," wrote Henri Nouwen, "asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

Prayer. Holy One, you are the shelter and hope of the exile; you are the softener of hearts. Give us grace to make a home for every wanderer. Amen.