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Lesson: Genesis 29:15-28 // Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it 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.” ³³He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

⁴⁴“The kingdom of heaven is 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. ⁴⁵“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵²And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

My memory is a little hazy of events that took place before my engagement to Ginger fifteen years ago. When I visited her parents’ house, I remember that I helped set the table before meals, I even helped cook a bit, and I definitely washed some dishes. Like I said, my memory of that time is a little hazy, so during that time I may have even moved a mattress or sofa for them. I am certain, though, that I didn’t perform manual labor for Ginger’s dad for seven years. I am certain he did not do a switcharoo of the bride on my wedding day, and I am certain I did not work another seven years to set it straight.

When we today read the story of Jacob eventually being united in love with Rachel, it is both amusing and bewildering. For several weeks now we’ve been reading segments of this grand ongoing story that began with Abraham and Sarah and has now worked its way to Jacob and Rachel now, and we will see how it continues to unfold. But for today, let us set aside our questions – and our

possible concerns – about the way that marriages worked in this story. Let's focus on what this tells us about God. Even though the human rules and customs say that the second-born son Jacob shouldn't receive the birthright and blessing, and even though the human expectations are that Jacob would marry Leah, those human expectations neither predict nor do they prescribe how God will act. Just because humanity has its methods and practices for doing things doesn't mean we should expect God to adhere to the same ways. This idea is actually the key to a better understanding of the parables in today's gospel.

Today's gospel contains a quick procession of five parables. As parables, they are supposed to point us toward a better comprehension of how God's reign operates in this world, but these five go by so quickly that it is hard to catch their lesson. So let's give them a closer look to see what Jesus is saying here. First, we need to remember the context. The Israelites had been conquered by various outside empires for more than five centuries. Time and again, an empire would attack, gain control, and try to force their will onto the people. By the time of Jesus, the Romans were now the conquerors. The whole empire was experiencing Pax Romana – the peace of Rome – which was the stretch of 200 years of nearly complete peace... a grand peace that was achieved by holding a sword to the throats of those whom Rome had conquered.

In this context, Jesus tells his parable of the mustard seed. It is something so tiny, but it grows to be a shrub that can reach about twelve feet tall. But Jesus says it "is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." A mustard plant never becomes a tree, and why is there this talk about all the birds and their nests? Well, Matthew's gospel enjoys tossing out references to passages from Hebrew scriptures. Ezekiel 31:6 says, "All the birds of the air made their nests in [the cedar tree's] boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lived." Daniel 4:12 says, "[The great tree's] foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed." That sounds delightful, doesn't it? It also sounds a lot like what Jesus said, right? Except that Ezekiel was using the cedar tree as a metaphor for the Assyrian empire that had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. A handful of verses later God says this great cedar tree will be cut down and cast out. Likewise, Daniel's great tree is a metaphor for the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The next verse in that passage has a voice from heaven declare, "Cut down the tree and

chop off its branches, strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from beneath it and the birds from its branches.” So when Jesus tells this parable of the mustard seed, the original listeners would have heard this as a statement that God’s reign is not like human empires. Empires force their will onto people through might and power. God is not so. The reign of God begins in ways that are overlooked... like a mustard seed... but something life-giving emerges. It might not be perceived as the mighty trees that are empires, but it gets the job done of bringing life, help, and hope to all people.

This transformation is like a woman who conceals a small amount of yeast in some flour, Jesus continues. That yeast is hidden. It goes unseen, where no one will ever notice it. Despite that hiddenness, though, the effects of the yeast begin to take hold and the transformation of the dough is unstoppable. So too is it when small, seemingly hidden acts of love create life-changing impacts in others.

Then Jesus moves on to the parable of the treasure found in a field. Rather than getting caught up in our questions concerning the details that are not revealed in this parable, we should focus on what is revealed: an unexpected discovery occurs, concealment, great joy, total divestment of resources, and the purchase of the field. The person does an extreme thing: taking the risk of selling everything in order to possess a treasure that he never expected to find. Is that like the reigning presence of God like that? When we discover God’s reign, do we consider it to be worth everything? Are we willing to sell off our attachments to the lures of empire, to let go of our human desire for power and might, in order to take possession of this new way of life?

This reign of God is like the finest of all pearls, Jesus says. When a merchant of pearls discovers this one most magnificent pearl, all the other pearls in his possession suddenly don’t add up to the value of this one. Like the treasure in the field, the exaggerated plot of this parable of the pearl asks this question: if the transformative reign of God is like this, are you all in? Are you willing to consider the ways your life is wrapped up in human tendencies for power, might, and empire, and then are you willing to let go of it for a new reign that is rooted in the love of God and love for neighbor?

The final parable is of a net cast into the water and it gathers a great variety of fish. In this variety are good fish and bad fish, all mixed together. So is God’s reign mixed in with this world. It is

a slowly emerging presence that won't swiftly eliminate brutal regimes like the Roman Empire, but the people can trust that God's justice and God's ways are present and they are emerging.

I received a phone call this week from a member of All Saints who recently had a medical procedure and the recovery hasn't gone according to plan. This member informed me that another member has been a tremendous help during this time. The first member just wanted to share how touching these acts have been and how they have been reminders of God's love. Mustard seed.

There are members whose hearts have been transformed by the work done with the boys at Windwood Farms in Awendaw. These are boys who've been removed from their homes due to circumstances of danger or abuse. These members annually put in countless hours and resources to get these boys ready for the school year; they schedule their calendars so they can monthly be present with the boys and share a meal with them. Mustard seed.

Today we lit a small candle, and we as a community said to an infant named Sophie that she is claimed by God, loved by God, and already given a purpose in her young life. We dared to say to her, "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world." Mustard seed.

The reign of God is like a mustard seed. It is not like the world's empires that enforce their ways through power and domination. As Christians, we must constantly question our commitments and how they reflect this idea of God's reign. Are we more committed to having power over others, or are we more committed to showing care and compassion? Just because humanity has its methods and practices for doing things doesn't mean we should expect God to adhere to the same ways. Our faith is rooted in God's grace and God's liberation. And if you want to see the reign of God, we look to acts of love, care, and compassion. We look for the small mustard seed. We look for the yeast concealed in the dough. These acts may be small, but they have a lasting impact that shape and transform people's lives and the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.