

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday, July 26, 2020
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Come Holy Spirit and kindle within our hearts the fire of your Love. Amen.

Please gather around and join me for story-time... Once upon a time on an old farm, a mother duck had laid six eggs but somehow seven were in her nest and the seventh egg was bigger than the others. One morning the eggs hatched but what emerged from the last egg was a very strange looking young duckling. This duckling never really fit in and always felt like an ugly outsider, until the day it learned its true identity.

There once was a shepherd-boy who watched a flock of sheep near a village. Out of boredom and spitefulness, this boy would sometimes cry out, "Wolf! Wolf!" and when the villagers came running, he would laugh at them. This continued until that one day when he found that he really needed the villagers' help.

There once was a hare that boasted to all the other animals of his great speed and challenged any of them to race with him. To the hare's surprise, the slow-going but diligent tortoise accepted the challenge and taught them all a lesson.

These are well-known fables – short stories that illustrate a particular moral lesson and are primarily used to teach children. Fables are allegorical stories that frequently feature animals, plants, or forces of nature that are given human qualities, often representing a single aspect or attribute. Because of their direct allegorical nature, fables are like puzzles, once you understand the overall picture – in this case, the moral lesson – the rest of the pieces fall together easily.

Parables, on the other hand, are something quite different. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that even though it is the tiniest of seeds, it grows into the greatest of trees, with room enough for all the birds to nest. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that, although it is often considered a corrupting agent, when just a little is worked into dough, it has the power to transform it and make it rise. The kingdom of heaven is like hidden treasure or a fine pearl for which someone sacrifices all else to obtain. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that collects every kind of fish from the sea, without discrimination, and leaves the sorting and evaluating for later.

Like fables, parables are short stories or similitudes that impart a moralistic or spiritual lesson, but they do so in a different way. Both fables and parables invite us to search for the meaning hidden beneath the literal, but parables are often designed to be shocking or baffling. By their very nature, a parable surprises us by with a twist or resolution that we do not expect, and this often shocks us into a different way of thinking. Parables also are a means of disclosing new truth that cannot be reduced to mere allegorical or didactic explanation. They are a way of providing insight into truths that cannot be explained or decoded in any other way. In this way, parables are more like a piece of art, or a musical composition, or a poem in how they reveal truth. They don't make a specific concrete point so much as they illuminate the mysterious. While fables may explain a truth, parables invite us to wonder in the presence of Truth.

In his book, *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures*, writer Malcolm Gladwell differentiates between puzzles and mysteries. He argues that a puzzle is a situation that can be completely understood with the right information; therefore the key to solving the puzzle is in gathering enough information. A mystery, however, Gladwell claims is different in that there isn't a simple, factual answer, and, frequently, gathering more information obscures rather than clarifies. Mysteries require creative interpretation.

Our gospels demonstrate that Jesus frequently taught in parables. They shocked, confounded, and, hopefully, provided surprising illumination for his followers. Understanding the

Truth of God, His will for creation, and his in-breaking Kingdom are mysteries that we are not able to put together like a puzzle. They are mysteries that require illumination and wonder, rather than explanation and reasoned understanding. Jesus understood this, which is why a truth as great as God's kingdom can only be revealed in small pieces.

So, what is all this imagery – the mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, pearl, and dragnet – what is all this pointing to? What truth are they revealing? I believe that, taken together, they point to the transformational power and potential of the kingdom of heaven that is hidden and threaded throughout creation.

The mustard seed is so very, very tiny, but buried deep within it, lies the potential to become a robust and great shrub, with branches plentiful and strong enough for the birds to come and build their nests. Likewise, in the kingdom of heaven, potential is hidden in even the most ordinary and unassuming, just waiting to erupt in glory. The kingdom of heaven also has the hidden potential to transform flour and water into risen dough, suggesting that when we experience God's in-breaking reign and integrate our faith in our lives, we, too, may live as risen and transformed people.

The kingdom of heaven, when discovered, brings great joy and motivates us to radical action. We are transformed to risk everything in this world that our culture says brings security, esteem, and meaning in order to possess this joy fully. Like the man who discovers the hidden treasure in the field or the merchant who searches and searches and, at last, finds the treasured pearl, in their joy, they sacrifice all else to possess it and hold it close.

And the kingdom of heaven is for all of us – each one of us with our very human mixture of good and evil alike. Like the net that that is dragged in the sea and catches fish of every kind without discrimination and judgment, we are all gathered to live in this kingdom here and now. The kingdom of heaven has the power to transform our hearts and minds so that we stop judging each other and let God take care of whatever sorting is needed in God's own time.

God's kingdom is a mystery, but that doesn't mean that we don't bother trying to understand, just that we should let go of approaching it as a puzzle. We must have the courage to seek illumination and wonder, rather than rational explanation. And more than that, to truly get our arms around mysteries, they often must be experienced – because transformation can only be lived.

Being raised in an agnostic and non-religious family, my desire for God and faith in Christ was baffling. I was steeped in the larger secular humanist culture where I was raised that greatly valued reason and logic, and so I spent many years pursuing an understanding of God through the way of knowledge. I made the mistake of treating this great mystery as a puzzle. I talked to ministers; I read many books; and I took college classes on the subject – I even majored in comparative religious studies. I learned lots of very smart information, but I was no closer to being in relationship with God. I could not find the Kingdom.

Later in adulthood, I faced a personal crisis that affected all that I hold dear and challenged my understanding of who I was. In fact, it wasn't until I completely fell apart and the whole smart puzzle that I had carefully constructed no longer made sense, that I was able to experience God and the transformative power of His kingdom. With nowhere else to turn, I fell on my knees before the God I didn't know, and found the kingdom of heaven hidden in what seemed like a most-unlikely place: a 12-step recovery group. To my surprise, it was there that I experienced God.

The lived experience of God and His kingdom sows within us the seeds of kingdom vision, which allow us to begin to see its hidden presence all around. I would like to say that now I am always seeing with kingdom vision, but sadly that is not true. For it seems that I cannot do this all on my own – it takes God's continued grace, as well as a community of the faithful, to support and encourage this transformation. As spiritual director and Mennonite pastor Sue Clemmer Steiner wrote, "I pray for eyes to glimpse the hidden, sometimes startling ways the kingdom of heaven is

already present. I pray for insight to see the familiar territory of my own life and community with reign-of-God eyes.”

The world needs the transformation of each one of our hearts. All of creation cries out for us to grasp God’s great mystery and to seek and find the hidden power of God’s kingdom threaded throughout. May we, with great joy upon finding it, risk everything with complete abandon to be transformed by God’s love.

Amen.