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Jesus asked his disciples: Have you understood all these things? They said, Yes.

Of course Jesus' disciples said yes! What else were they going to say?

Their teacher has just told them eight parables about the kingdom of heaven in rather rapid succession: four to the mixed multitude and then four to them in private, with the added bonus of an explanation of two of the parables.

But we know, because we've read ahead in the story, the disciples don't totally get it, and Jesus knows, by reading their hearts, they don't totally get it.

And Jesus knows that neither do we—totally get it; he sees the human heart and all of who we are with unflinching clarity, which is why he keeps sowing the word and the seeds of the kingdom with such resolute single-mindedness; and then sends the Holy Spirit to guide his disciples into the same single-mindedness of truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I'm not sure this is possible in our earthly life, to ascertain and speak "complete truth." But as Paul tells us this morning in Romans: *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray—to listen and speak, to meditate and think deeply—as we ought; but that very Spirit intercedes for us and within us, with sighs and groans too deep for words.* We don't understand, *but God does. The One who sees into all hearts knows the prayers of the Spirit and that they are of divine will.*

I take great solace in this, knowing as I do that more often than I would like, my prayer is fleeting and pallid; mind you, knowing that the Spirit is at work within us despite ourselves is no excuse *not* to attend to our prayers and spiritual life! Paul also says in 1 Corinthians (4:20) that *the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* Most basically, he means that as disciples we are to walk the talk, not just talk the talk. But also, in the context of our scriptures

this morning, that the kingdom of God *is* the power of the Spirit—manifest most especially in our weakness, vulnerability, and insignificance—in that which is irrelevant, overlooked, hidden, unseen, and of little account: in the speck of seed and yeast, in the buried treasure, the hidden jewel amid the junk—in the the small, shrinking, and aging church.

The Spirit sighs and groans here, there, now, near, and far—the net is cast wide—that the Spirit catches us up in its power, its muscle creative and generative love; might we then say that the kingdom of God *is* the deepest aspiration of love for all creation? the whole creation groaning in labor pains as the kingdom is birthed?

But too, I'm sure that it *is* possible to to understand “complete truth” in this earthly life; in the sense that if we truly grasp the meaning of even of one parable, if we see and embrace even one thing with the deepest of authenticity and awareness, with conscious innocence in the present moment, we touch the whole truth and nothing but the truth—the ultimate reality—the kingdom of God.

I've been thinking a lot this week about the kingdom God; though the language of “kingdom” feels a little remote to me or too concrete, conjuring up images of ancient castles, turrets, and banners and patriarchal monarchy, which I can't really relate to, nor particularly want to. And of course this is not what Jesus is pointing to or talking about.

I wondered how do I, do we, *experience* the kingdom or realm of God? I like the word “realm” because it feels more accessible—though I see the word “kingdom” as very clear and shining, and “realm” as more muted or impressionistic.

Coloring language as we do with connotations, some conscious, many unconscious, we often don't know why something speaks to us or not; why we are inspired or repulsed, offended, or delighted at some word, scripture, concept or conversation. In being spoken about as “hidden,” the kingdom of God may be both alluring and frightening to us in its hiddenness and silence and our unknowing.

In my own conversations this week about the kingdom, I realized that I was perceiving the kingdom of God as different from God—as if God is here and God's kingdom or heaven is there, somewhere else. I came to settle on—at least for the time being—that the kingdom is the very *livingness* of the holy—always present and ever now; and that anymore than we can separate out essence from existence, ourselves from the love of Christ, can we divide kingdom from God.

Jesus is always teaching about the kingdom of God, some 38 times over in Matthew alone. For the last 3 weeks, we have heard all of the parables about the kingdom from Matthew 13. As I was preparing the sermon, I suddenly saw a connection between these eight parables from Matthew 13 and the eight Beatitudes of Matthew 5, which also speak to what the kingdom and its citizens are like. The beatitudes and the parables are intertwined in their poetic, prophetic, and paradoxical language about the kingdom of heaven and its meaning, and I've been playing with their correlation and my interpretation of their interconnection. Please note that I share only the first line from each parable.

Jesus says:

*How blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

And then:

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

God the wildly impractical Sower grows life *anywhere*: most especially from a crack in a shattered heart, from a seed that falls into barren soil and dies. From an empty tomb, from the poverty of the spirit, the impossibility of a kingdom of heaven on earth grows.

*Be a spot of ground where nothing is growing,
where something might be planted,
a seed even from the Absolute. ~ Rumi*

Jesus says:

*Blessed are the gentle,
For they shall inherit the earth.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field.

No matter how zealously we go about pulling up what we deem to be deadly, mistaken, wrong, inferior, inadequate, or ineffectual weeds from the Garden, none of us are able to

pluck out the human heart. Jesus calls us to non-judgement, restraint, humility, and conscious innocence. The harvest belongs to God and the kingdom to the gentle.

Jesus says:

*Blessed are they who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.

In Jesus' day, the mustard seed was a throw away seed, a weed a farmer would pull from his field and burn; a seed so minuscule as to be almost invisible. Have you ever felt invisible and worthless? I know that I have. God transforms our loss and lament, our grief and sorrow, our hearts to become a flowering refuge for the same creatures of the kingdom.

Jesus says:

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.

In Jesus' day, leaven or yeast was considered unclean and associated with decay; yet the kingdom of heaven is fermented by a pinch of yeast that a woman—aka God!—mixes in with three measures of flour until all of it is leavened—until there is enough bread for a wedding feast! First the fast, then the feast.

Jesus says:

*Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall be shown mercy.*

And then:

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

Finders keepers, losers weepers. But fair is fair: the treasure of the happened upon kingdom is only claimed by an earthly cost—at selling all of our possessions. The mercy of God is our joy—not our sorrow—at letting go of everything to obtain the treasure of the kingdom fair and square.

Jesus says:

*Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

In the darkness of our flesh wisdom is cloistered like a pearl inside its shell—a mere speck of matter and spark of divinity. The seeker dives for the pearl, even when afraid, again and again, descending into the depths of the dark of the heart with only her breath until suddenly her eyes are opened: there it is—the priceless and pearlescent kingdom.

Jesus says:

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be recognized as children of God.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.

One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish, good fish, bad fish—angel fish, devil fish—peacemakers and troublemakers alike—every kind of fish is caught in apocalyptic net of the kingdom. Can we all get along? Do we pursue peace or rest on our haunches? Do we *make*

peace, do we *wage* peace? are we reconcilers and kingdom-makers? when the world looks into the mirror of our lives, does it see something newly born or something adulterated?

Jesus says:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

And then:

The kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

Be wise: don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Wisdom honors truth in both the old and the new. Wisdom honors the storeroom of tradition and innovation, and the treasure of youth and age, and anyone who is oppressed because they are committed to working in the household of the kingdom, for its good, no matter. Don't worry; God has your back.

Perceived, received, and pondered in the heart, re-incarnated inwardly, lived and embraced outwardly, the kingdom of heaven is like all these things and more.

Jesus asked his disciples: Have you understood all these things?

They answered . . .