

July 30, Ordinary 17A (Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52)

The kingdom of heaven inspires devotion, commitment, and downright unreasonableness.

by [Libby Howe](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks after his parables. His disciples answer yes—but we cannot possibly believe them. I doubt they believe themselves. I doubt Jesus believes them. They rarely “understand all this” when Jesus teaches.

Some have interpreted their yes as a fear or shame response. They lie and say yes because they do not want to admit their ignorance and disappoint their teacher. Maybe so. But there is another possibility.

What if we hear Jesus asking this question not seriously but humorously? What if it is not a test of understanding at all but a mutual recognition of the absurdity that any of this teaching about the kingdom of heaven, much less all of it, could be understood by mortals?

This conversation about the kingdom of heaven does not sound like other orations in the Gospel of Matthew. It is not the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus does not bind or loose the law. He does not bless the poor or condemn immorality. He does not teach anyone to pray. He does not appear to challenge any authority or undermine any norms.

Instead, this scene has the character of a young, carefree group of friends on a warm, sunny day, shoes off, sipping some cool water, sleeves rolled up to their elbows, reclining in the shade of a large tree. One of them, maybe while looking up at the clouds, casually asks, “What do you think the kingdom of heaven is like?”

And Jesus, after a contemplative pause, starts to speak his imagination, constructing ideas as he voices them. *Well, it's kind of like . . . or maybe it's like . . . but then again, it might be better described as . . .* After trying out his series of metaphorical experiments, he turns to them and says, *Clear as mud, eh?* (Have you understood all this?) *Yeah, sure*, they all agree.

The playfulness of the conversation should not diminish the importance of the images. Even if Jesus is just trying out possibilities to encapsulate the infinite realities of the kingdom of heaven through the finite limitations of human language, there is great value in the language he chooses. Engaging our own imaginations, we can learn multitudes from every metaphor Jesus grasps for in these verses.

The mustard seed—it looks small, but it does not stay that way. Mustard seeds are not all that desirable (often thought of as nuisance plants like creeping Charlie or dandelions), but if allowed to become large enough, they can become useful and provide a safe home for vulnerable creatures. The yeast that a woman bakes with—it does its miraculous, silent work of transformation to turn inedible flour into nourishing, sustaining food. The kingdom of heaven is in the everyday, ordinary, and even undesirable stuff of life. The kingdom of heaven is surprising and stealthy and subversive. The kingdom of heaven provides food and shelter.

Jesus continues to play with the images in verse 44. The kingdom is like a treasure that's hidden, but then someone finds it and hides it again. Then with great joy they sell everything they have and buy the whole field! Who sells everything they have joyfully? Why hide the treasure in the field again? Why not just take the treasure? Because the kingdom is not a thing like a treasure. It is everything that finding a treasure can do to a person. The kingdom of heaven inspires devotion, commitment, sacrifice, and downright unreasonableness.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net with a huge catch of fish of every kind, and a sorting party ensues and makes sure the good is kept and the bad is thrown away. Now there's something about the kingdom of heaven that requires sorting—not everything belongs there. But the parable of the wheat and weeds cautions us that the question of what belongs is not for humans to decide right now but for God to decide at the end of the age.

These parables do much more than explain what the kingdom of heaven is. They model *how* to experience the kingdom of heaven come near, God with us. What a tremendous invitation to the preacher! A sermon on this text, like the cascade of images Jesus proposes, needs to have soft, watercolor edges. Invite the community into Jesus' process. Let his metaphors and your own expand and refine each other.

Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is like a preacher who abandoned their need to project knowing certainty and welcomed their listeners into a conversation with Jesus and his friends. And when they did, joy and laughter filled the room. Everyone

was unafraid to admit they did not understand all these things. Instead, they delighted in the gift of never being expected to.