

"X" Marks the Spot
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Renowned preacher, theology professor and storyteller Fred Craddock swears this happened to him: He was visiting in a home of one of his former students after graduation, and after a great dinner, the young parents excused themselves and hustled the kids off to bed, leaving Fred in the living room with the family pet—a large, sleek greyhound. Earlier in the evening Fred had watched the kids roll on the floor playing with the family dog. "That's a full-blooded greyhound there," the father of the kids had told Fred. "He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids, that greyhound." Well, sitting there with the dog, the dog turned to Fred and asked, "This your first visit to Connecticut?" "No," Fred answered. "I went to school up here a long time ago." "Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami," said the greyhound. "Oh, yeah, you retired?" Fred said. "No, is that what they told you? No, no, I didn't retire. I tell you, I spent 10 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 10 years of running around that track day after day, seven days a week with others chasing that rabbit. Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good look at that rabbit. It was a fake! I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! Hey, I didn't retire; I quit!"

In the parables from today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was trying to help his disciples to stop chasing a fake rabbit in order to be able to be open to the kingdom of God. The parables we heard today must have shocked the disciples and all who heard them in that context. But that was exactly what Jesus was trying to do because the kingdom of God reorients/shocks us to what is real and important in life: the presence of God. Each of these parables has an element of surprise in it or a twist that makes it clear that the kingdom of God is not what we normally expect.

We often think about the parable of the mustard seed relating to our faith. Yet mustard can be considered a weed. One seed quickly produces sufficient plants to overwhelm a field. Would a careful farmer plant a weed in a productive field? The key insight is that this parable portrays the outrageous picture of someone sowing a weed into their field. For Jewish folks, it definitely is not kosher to plant it with anything else; if one grows it intentionally, it must be separated from other crops. So, the kingdom of God is like dandelions or a noxious weed. Mustard grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted. On the other hand, when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it. When the seed falls on the ground, it germinates at once. And birds of the air? The last place we want them is in our grain field.

The second parable is about yeast. From our perspective, there is nothing wrong with yeast. But in the time of Jesus, yeast was looked at as a negative thing because leavened bread spoils faster. The yeast is hidden in a generous amount of flour – three measures would be about 25 kilograms/50 pounds. How can yeast leaven so much? This pervasive nature of yeast conveys contamination, corruption, and subversion. A modern paraphrase might be: "The kingdom of God is like a virus in a dirty needle that a junkie took and injected into a vein so the whole body was infected." Yet in the parable from this woman's "hiding" the yeast comes incredible abundance—bread to feed more than 100 people.

The parable of the hidden treasure is another surprise. There is an unethical practice here. As John Dominic Crossan points out: "If the treasure belongs to the finder, buying the land is unnecessary. But, if the treasure does not belong to the finder, buying the land is unjust." How could the person who found it justify cheating the people he is buying the land from without telling them that there is a valuable treasure there?

Then we have the parable of the merchant who sells everything he has in order to get the pearl of great price. This may seem like a neat thing to do if you were a collector, but financially speaking, as a merchant, this kind of practice is unwise. What about prudent financial practices of spreading investments to minimize loss? Would an experienced merchant place

one's total wealth in a single investment?

The parable of fishing for every kind of fish breaks all conventions. Nets are woven to catch particular species. Sorting through the full range of species to pull out what is edible would be unnecessarily time consuming. Would fishermen break with expected practice? So, what was Jesus trying to say to his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of God by using such shocking parables? I believe that the message was that the presence or reign of God is not what people expect, yet it is of the greatest value. God's grace is world-shattering and overwhelming! Again in this text, Matthew includes a word of seeming judgment (verses 49–50), in order to encourage acceptance of Jesus' authority or to encourage believers to evaluate their own lives. The expansion of God's realm to all humankind is grounded in the hope-filled treasure of God's grace and compassion. Matthew's writing is confident that such a treasure should not be ignored or refused. In the parables of Matthew, the kingdom Jesus announces is subversive, unstoppable, invasive, a nuisance, urgent, shocking, and abundant. It requires action and commitment and inspires extreme behavior. Yet, Jesus uses ordinary images from our common life to show us that one of the most shocking qualities of the reign/presence of God is that it comes to us in our daily life when we least expect it. Theologian and teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Why else would he [Jesus] talk about heaven in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and merchants buying and selling things and fisherman sorting fish, unless he meant somehow to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map but that "X" marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities in our lives."

Do we really know and live by this revelation that the reign and presence of God are here among us and within us each day? Does our faith make such a big difference in our lives? Does it shape everything that we do? Does the church challenge us to be shaped by kingdom values or do we just come to church to be "good" Christians? Are we listening to the deeper yearning of our hearts and to this transforming kind of experience that Jesus talked about? What do we tell our friends and families about the presence and reign of God? What makes this Kingdom any better than what can be gotten at the mall? Is it bigger than the consumer paradise promised every 7 minutes while we watch "American Idol" or "CSI?" Is it something that can only be had after we die, so we must suffer in this life to earn it? Will we be any closer to the Kingdom of Heaven if the "right" president is elected, or if our kids pray in school, or if we properly observe separation of church and state? If we double the new member classes and exceed the demands of the annual budget will we be any closer to the Kingdom of Heaven? I believe that this reign of God is not about the right formulas for our churches, families or governments. It is truly about the transforming nature of God's presence in our world. Once we realize and live knowing that "X" marks the treasure that is here within us, our lives are transformed and the pervasive love of God is spread wildly and generously to others. We are created to live a life of love, but we are only free to do so when we are connected to the treasure of God's presence in our lives. Here is a story about this transforming and surprising presence of God.

In the book, "Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul," Samuel Bogan tells this story about the transformation of a 13-year-old boy named Frank Wilson. He had this unease about him. It was true that he had received all the presents he wanted and that he enjoyed the traditional Christmas Eve reunions of relatives, especially when they exchanged gifts. But Frank was not happy because this was his first Christmas without his brother, Steve, who, during the past year had been killed by a reckless driver. So, Frank decided to leave the party a little early to see a friend. Since it was cold outside, Frank put on his new plaid jacket. It was his favorite gift. The other gifts he placed on his new sled. Then he started walking while hoping to find the patrol leader of his Boy Scout troop. Though rich in wisdom, his patrol leader lived in the Flats, the section of town where most of the poor lived. To his disappointment, his friend was not at home.

So Frank started heading home when he noticed through one front window of one of the houses he was passing a woman sitting by her fireplace and crying. He could see that the stockings were hanging empty over the empty fireplace. A sudden thought struck him and he acted on it. He knocked on the door and asked the lady if he could come in. The woman assumed that he was there for some kind of collection because of the sled, so she said, "you are welcome to come in but I have nothing to offer: no food or gifts. In fact, I have nothing for my own children." Frank quickly said, "That's not why I am here. Please choose whatever presents you would like for your children from this sled." The woman was so amazed as she selected some candies, a game, the toy airplane and a puzzle. When she took the new Scout flashlight, Frank almost cried out. Finally, the stockings were full. Frank even gave her his new plaid jacket. "Won't you tell me your name?" She asked. "Just call me the Christmas Scout," Frank said. The visit left the boy touched and with an unexpected joy in his heart, but as he started walking home, he started thinking of some reasonable explanations to offer his parents. As he walked into his house, his father said, "Where are your presents?" Frank said, "I gave them away." "The airplane from Aunt Susan? Your coat from Grandma? Your flashlight? We thought you were happy with your gifts." Frank said, "I was very happy, but I felt the need to help someone else." His mother said, "But, Frank, how could you be so impulsive?" After a heated argument that evening, Frank went to bed and thought of his brother and sobbed himself to sleep. The next morning, he came downstairs to find his parents listening to Christmas music on the radio. Then the announcer spoke: "Merry Christmas, everybody! The nicest Christmas story we have this morning comes from the Flats. A crippled boy down there has a new sled this morning, another youngster has a fine plaid jacket, and several families report that their children were made happy last night by gifts from a teenage boy who simply referred to himself as the Christmas Scout. No one could identify him, but the children of the Flats claim that he Christmas Scout was a personal representative of Old Santa Claus himself." Frank felt his father's arms go around his shoulders and he saw his mother smiling through her tears. "Why didn't you tell us? We didn't understand. We are so thankful for your love and care!

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a pearl of great price, a net with all kinds of fish. The reign of God is where X marks the spot, right here and right now in every heart that is transformed by God's presence to love and to serve. Amen