



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## When Leaven Is Good

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 27, 2014  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

As we get into and even beyond high summer, the news seems to get worse and worse. Each week my colleagues and I parse every word of the gospel, doing our best to find in these ancient texts our basis of hope in the world, a world that seems to be careening chaotically out of control. At best we can say that the stories most often are enigmatic, sometimes utterly abstruse and, yet, often hinting of glimpses into the heart of God. No one single story is the one that makes all things clear but somehow collectively keeps us in the struggle—a struggle we need to share with one another.

Most often the scripture reminds us that God is rarely as we imagine God to be. This has been proved again and again in my life. Just when I think that I have it all figured out—which is to say when God seems to be feeling the same way I do about everything—something calls me up short, a nuance my limited view of the world has missed, an absolute that is less so than I had thought. Anne Lamott says that when we find that God dislikes the same people we dislike, we are probably misunderstanding God. Publically I get that and, of course, agree with her; secretly, though, I still wonder, which no doubt means I have a ways to go.

The short, funky little parables we have just heard are in fact Jesus' way of teaching his disciples this very lesson. It is a theme found throughout most of our holy scripture: God simply does not process the world the same way we do and in fact inverts what most often would seem to us to be patently true. But before we take a deeper look at a few of these parables, I want to acknowledge how heartened I am by the efforts Jesus took to help us understand what the kingdom of heaven is like—no matter how culturally obscure these teachings may be to us. He wanted us to recognize the kingdom of heaven, and somehow that truth seems particularly important to me this week. While much about faith is unknowable—honestly for me at this point in my life, I'd have to say more is unknowable than knowable—surely part of Jesus' mission was to give us some sense of who and how God is in the world. He brings us this awareness not for the sake of our possessing it but so that we can live as those in the kingdom of heaven now, as those who can know and claim the presence of hope in all kinds of circumstances. Isn't that what incarnation ultimately is, the incoming of the divine into the reality of humanness?

Each of these parables inverts what we might ordinarily expect; and, yet, in doing so each tells us a truth about God. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Hardly propitious, the tiny mustard seed is pretty unimpressive. Couldn't Jesus have used something a bit grander, a Cedar of Lebanon or something? But the diminutive size of the mustard seed is not the real surprise of the story. As every hearer of Jesus would have known, the mustard seed becomes a weed, a worthless and profuse one at that. Utterly ordinary, far from glamorous or useful, its scrubby shade was worth almost nothing in the relentless Middle Eastern sun. And it pops up anywhere like weeds do, making me think of kudzu in the South, hard to control, winding here and there just where no one wants it. The kingdom of heaven is like kudzu, Jesus said—how absurd!

What might his point have been? I think he was simply stating what he knew to be true about God: The fact that God looks at the same things we see and, yet, sees them in radically different ways. The kingdom of God, he seemed to be saying, is not what we would expect. It appears in unlikely places. Throughout the history of our salvation, God has consistently chosen to be on the side of the small, the young, and the unimpressive. The realm of God is not about power and prestige, not about wealth and grandeur but like an ordinary seed of mustard, as every

day as the air we breathe. Look for it, he seemed to saying, all around you, not just in places set aside to be holy. The kingdom of heaven has come near, as near as a pesky, hard-to-manage weed.

Stranger yet is the parable that claims that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast used to leaven bread. For us, leaven is a good thing, or certainly neutral. Not so among the Jews hearing Jesus tell this parable. “Unleavened” was a metaphor for the holy; leaven, on the other hand, symbolized evil or corruption, a notion deriving from the fact that leaven is the substance which leads to fermentation, which is just shy of being rotten.

Several years ago the New Testament theologian Brandon Scott suggested that Jesus’ use of leaven in this parable was in fact to emphasize Jesus’ constant theme of including those traditionally thought of as unholy: women, the poor, the sick and damaged. Perhaps he is right; if so, this would indeed have enraged his traditional hearers. You may know that yesterday in Philadelphia there was a huge celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church—an event which outraged a few folks itself. We might say that forty years ago an unleavened church got a big dose of leaven, and we have never been the same since. And the beat goes on.

This little enigmatic story about what is holy and what is not, about what the kingdom of heaven involves and what it does not, continues to perplex and challenge us. It demands that we question the holiness of our actions in all sorts of matters, including what our response is to the arrival of unaccompanied immigrant children into our midst. Does it mean that we absolutely know what to do in every case? No, of course not. But it emphatically means that in the kingdom of heaven the easy dismissal of any child leaves us empty and diminished ourselves. This parable also demands that to be in the kingdom of heaven we must stand on the side of justice in the world beyond our borders even when good and powerful friends may not so align themselves; and it requires that we question the morality of war as such when the hard work of addressing the underlying issues of injustice has not been done. None of it is easy or clear, but so necessary.

The last of the parables I shall briefly mention is the one about the man who found a great treasure in a field and then sold all that he had so that he could buy the field where the treasure was. Everything he had ever owned suddenly seemed valueless when compared to this treasure he had found, and no price was too great to pay to assure that he would have it forever. That passion, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The traditional understanding of this parable is that it is an illustration of the cost of discipleship—that the man, when he found the treasure, **had** to sell all that he had to keep the kingdom of heaven. What a churchy view of what was in fact miraculously joyous! This is about a man who had been looking for the wrong thing his whole life, about a man who was putting in his time, just waiting for the gold watch, who suddenly realized that the gold watch was not what he wanted in the first place—because he finally had found the real treasure, the kingdom of heaven!

The kingdom of heaven reverses our lives, our priorities, and our desires. It shows us that some of the trash of life, some of its weeds, contain mysteries that we have longed to understand; it shows us that some things and some people we considered out of the fold, unholy, too different to be loved, actually convey to us the holiness for which we have been searching all our lives. And it focuses and refocuses our journeys, questioning our priorities and showing us paths, pearls of great value, we never knew even existed.

Yes, of course, there is hope in this world, even during seasons like this when so much seems so wrong. For the kingdom of heaven continues to come near and the great conversion God has in heart and mind for us—indeed for all creation—is far from complete. In fact, it is only beginning to be imagined!

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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