

“The Kingdom of God is, Like, a Mustard Seed.” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (7/30/2023, The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost)

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You may think it started with the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, in which Rachel McAdams, as Regina George, says, “you should know that this is, like, a huge deal” before inviting the new girl Cady to lunch with her group every day for the rest of the week (Karen reminds Cady that on Tuesdays they wear pink.)

Or, you may think it comes from farther back, from 1995’s *Clueless*. Alicia Silverstone’s character Cher says it right off the bat: “So OK, you’re probably thinking, ‘is this, like, a Noxema commercial, or what?!’”

Or you may trace its origins back to an even more ancient text: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, all the way back 41 years ago in 1982. Sean Penn as Spicoli, trying to learn American history, comes to a realization and says: “so, like, when Jefferson went before the people what he was saying was 'Hey, we left this place in England because it was bogus, and if we don't come up with some cool rules ourself, we'll be bogus, too!' Right?”

And finally, you may be thinking of one of the best lines of late 20th-century popular culture from *The Big Lebowski*, in which the Dude is threatened by someone in a bowling alley and responds, in perfect Dude-like fashion, “Yeah well, that’s just, you know, like, your opinion, man.”

Wherever you think the use of the word “like” as what is termed in grammatical studies a “hedge,” you probably think it is overused, and you probably think it is the exclusive domain of young people. And yet, as any good structural linguist will tell you, “like” as I have used it in the above four examples is a perfectly legitimate use of the word, one of the thousands of ways in which language inevitably slips, slides, and changes over time. Like, really!

“Like” is a very versatile English word. And it is the key to our Gospel passage today, because it joins together heaven and earth, time and eternity, God and human. “Like” gives us access to what we otherwise wouldn’t have access to: some human understanding of God. Of what God is *like*.

This is very helpful for me in thinking about this series of rapid and brief parables we get from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew today. It is so important to remember that the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven,” which may conjure up images of a white bearded God sitting on a cloud surrounded by the Disney castle, is NOT the best way to think about what Jesus means.

A better phrase might be something like: “When God is in charge,” or “In God’s world,” or even “From God’s Perspective.”

The “Kingdom of God,” or the “Kingdom of Heaven,” is for Jesus a very present reality. It is the inbreaking of God’s desire, or God’s dream, into *our* world, into *our* reality.

Jesus tells us over and over again, in simple analogies called parables, that the Kingdom of God contrasts sharply with the Kingdoms of this World. Their origin stories begin in violence and conquest. Their Emperors claimed divine lineage, descent from the gods themselves. Their military victories were announced as Gospel, as good news, the same word that the Scriptures use to announce the good news of Jesus.

The Kingdoms of this World value people only instrumentally, only for what they can contribute to the Empire, to the corporation, to the economy. The Kingdoms of this World take their shape from violence and coercion, from greed and a lust for power. And though they presume to be eternal kingdoms, their strength cannot last, for as Jesus says in another place, a kingdom divided against itself will never be able to stand.

By contrast, Jesus’s preaching on the Kingdom of God highlights all the wrong things. Weakness and obscurity somehow lead to a peaceful harmony of humanity with itself, with God, and with all creation.

Jesus's preaching on the Kingdom of Heaven asks: What does it look like when God is in charge? What shape does God's world take? From God's Perspective, what is important? What is valued? What matters?

Seeds. Leavening. Buried Treasure. A Pearl.

When God is in charge, the most insignificant seed becomes a home, a resting place, a refuge, for the birds of the air.

In God's world, a small amount of leavening becomes the means by which 100 loaves of bread are made.

God's world takes the shape of something buried in the ground, invisible and yet known by the one who buried it, something for which that One gladly gives everything he possesses.

When God is in charge, no expense is spared to purchase an object of immeasurable beauty and worth.

I don't know what you expected the Creator of the Universe to tell us about God and God's world. I think that, left to our own devices, many of us would expect God in the Flesh to tell us the sorts of things that you see on the History Channel nowadays, the secrets of the Nazca Lines in Peru or the Nazi Aliens of Area 51 or the definitive evidence for the existence of Bigfoot.

Many in our culture still imagine that being religious is really about learning the Secret Handshake or getting the Decoder Ring or whatever the Thing is that will unlock all the mysteries of Time, Space and Eternity.

And so: it's just wonderfully strange and beautifully simple that these are the pictures of the Kingdom that Jesus gives us. Something that begins in smallness and insignificance. Something virtually invisible to the world

around us. Something NOT obvious. Something LIKE . . . normal. Like, everyday. Like, human.

Now, what are these parables saying? All of these parables communicate transformation, but this is a transformation that we don't and can't accomplish on our own. These transformations are accomplished by the grace and power of God: from seed to tree, from yeast to bread, from hidden, unknown, and obscure treasures to those discovered, purchased, and loved. These are less stories about the things we have to do for God and more stories about what God has done for us.

And so: what if Jesus is the mustard seed, buried in the ground and raised to new life, the one who stretches out his branches for us, the birds of the air, to come and rest in him?

What if God is the woman who takes us, we lumps of leavening, leavening which is not just the little teaspoon of yeast out of a glass jar but the sour lump that usually in Scripture is a bad thing, like the leaven of the Pharisees and Saducees Jesus warns the disciples against just a few chapters later—what if God is the woman who takes us and transforms us from that lumpy leavening into the bread of life, the bread that can feed the world's deep hunger?

What if we are the treasure buried in the field? What if you are treasure, treasure that God created for God's own pleasure? Treasure that Jesus was joyful to give everything up for, including his own life, to purchase and redeem from the power of Sin and Death?

What if you are the pearl of great value? The pearl of immense value, unique and loved into being every moment by the infinitely good and loving Creator? What if Jesus really did empty himself of all that he had by right, as God, in order to purchase You?

Priceless treasure.

Do you believe that?

It is really quite unbelievable. I often have trouble believing it myself. That's why it is good to be here this morning and every time we can, to be reminded of the unbelievably good news that God loves us and treasures us and transforms us.

Because the inner critic visits us often: the voice that tells us that we are not good enough, not worthy enough, not focused enough, not accomplished enough, not righteous enough, simply not perfect enough for the lavish cost that Jesus spent on us; that voice is the voice of the Enemy, the Accuser, the one who sows the seeds of self-doubt and self-condemnation, the one whom St. Ignatius calls "the enemy of our human nature."

Paul knew that voice. That was the voice that had been in his head for a long time, the voice that had corrupted the faith of his youth to the point that he was willing to put others to death just to feed the voice that told him he had to work to make God love him. To win the God Game by racking up enough points to keep leveling up.

All of us have heard the voice of the Accuser from time to time, telling us that God's love is conditional, that it is dependent on how well we perform, that we better not fail, and that if we do, God stands ready to condemn us.

But what if, as Paul says, there is now *no* condemnation for those in Christ Jesus? What if nothing can separate us from the love of God, not death, or life, or angels, or rulers, or things present, or things to come, or powers, or height, or depth, or anything else in all creation?

Loving yourself is hard. Seeing yourself as God's beloved treasure is hard! But I have become convinced through my own spiritual journey, over many years, that loving yourself is of great spiritual value.

Many of us may have been taught not to love ourselves. We may have been taught that because of our sin, or our identity, or our circumstances, or our choices that we were unlovable. Many of us may have even been taught that in church.

Jesus says the Greatest Commandment is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. There are three objects of love named in the Greatest Commandment, therefore: God, your neighbor, and yourself.

The Polish rabbi Simcha Bunem once said:

Every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am only dust and ashes." When one is feeling too proud, reach into this pocket and take out this paper and read it. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created." When one is feeling disheartened and lowly, reach into this pocket and take this paper out and read it. We are each the joining of two worlds. We are fashioned from clay, but our spirit is the breath of Adonai.

Though Rabbi Bunem lived 1800 years after St. Paul, I feel a spiritual kinship between the two. Paul was keenly aware of his frailty, failures, and shortcomings, and his "total inability to save himself," but because he knew the grace of God, he knew the love of God had depths beyond anything he could possibly imagine.

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Ruth Burrows, speaks of this paradox in Paul's life. She points out that his conversion was based on the shattering of his own self-important image, his own self-knowledge. A moment of crisis in which Paul's entire reason for existence seemed to hang in the balance.

His presumptions to righteousness lay broken in a million pieces on the ground. But rather than despair at being dust and ashes, Paul learned to boast not in himself, but in the power of God that is made perfect in weakness.

Now here's where Sister Burrows is most helpful. Paul claims "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." She writes:

This does not mean Paul experienced *himself* as strong, most likely he continued to feel weak and fearful, but he was certain that the *divine* weakness and powerlessness of love by which we were redeemed was invincible.

Weak, Fearful, and Like a Pearl of Great Value, like a Treasure hidden in a field. Dust and ashes, yes, and at the same time someone for whom the World was Created, and for whom God sold all that God had to purchase. That is you, and that is me. And *that* is what God is Like.

AMEN.