

Matthew 13:24-43

Jesus taught in parables. Matthew claims here that he taught in parables in order that people would fail to understand. This makes sense to Matthew, because he's always looking for ways that Jesus fulfilled scripture. Isaiah 6:9-10 has God telling the prophet to

'Go and say to this people:	and shut their eyes,
"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;	so that they may not look with their eyes,
keep looking, but do not understand."	and listen with their ears,
Make the mind of this people dull,	and comprehend with their minds,
and stop their ears,	and turn and be healed.'

But I find it hard to believe that Jesus didn't want people to understand. More persuasive to me is the idea that he taught in parables *because* they are multivalent. It was an oral culture. He taught out loud. He might tell a parable to a group, and then they would start working out its meaning together, each one hearing something a little different, and all of them weighing the various possibilities, learning from each other. Comprehending with their minds, turning and being healed.

In the same way, telling a story that everybody knows, or a story about people everybody knows, enriches our relationships with one another. This is an insight that the Lent Planning Committee will be using in a few short weeks, and I'm just teasing it here. But it's relevant to today's parables, as I hope to demonstrate.

The first parable is about a farmer who plants wheat, but his enemy sneaks over and plants weeds, so both are growing in the same field. I have questions right away. Don't weeds come up by themselves? Why does the enemy have to be so pro-active and actually carry weed seeds over? But wait, there's more.

The servants offer to weed the field, pull out the weeds, but the farmer says no.

Apparently this is a weed that looks a lot like wheat when it's young, and he says that they may accidentally pull out the good wheat. So it's better to *tend the field as it is* and wait till the reapers come at harvest time, when they'll separate out the two kinds of plants.

NOW I understand. The enemy came and planted weeds, hoping that the farmer would sabotage his own self, pulling weeds and wheat or, even if just pulling weeds, disturbing the roots of the wheat. And the farmer outsmarted him by NOT reacting to the vandalism. The wheat would have grown better with less competition, but given the realities, it's still going to do better with this competition than if its roots were disturbed in the process of pulling out the weeds. What this means for the servants is that they have to spend the whole growing season giving tender loving care to both weeds and wheat. They lack the specialized knowledge to distinguish between them, so they'll just have to care for all the plants.

This, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of God is like. It's like not knowing who belongs and who doesn't, and by default living as if everyone belonged. Trusting that God's got this.

Now Jesus says that the kingdom of God is also like a mustard seed that someone planted in his field. It's a very small seed, but when it's grown it is "the greatest of shrubs" such that birds can even nest in its branches. Now I will confess that my favorite interpretation of this parable is the one in which mustard is a weed and birds are undesirable riff-raff, and the kingdom is weedlike in the sense that it'll always show up, can't be eradicated, and attracts riff-raff. But Matthew does say that this mustard seed was planted intentionally in the person's own field. And you have to love that it's "the greatest of shrubs." Can shrubs be great? Does one gasp involuntarily at the sight of a mature boxwood as one does at the sight of a redwood? Hmm, perhaps we should.

If you planted the mustard seed (which I will still insist is kind of a nuisance plant) in your field, you probably planted it so you could have mustard. When it matures, you can indeed harvest the mustard, which is very satisfactory, but also it turns out that your project is benefiting birds too. Lookit that, cascading benefits. It's like when they re-introduced wolves into Yellowstone Park.

The park radically changed after humans exterminated the gray wolf from Yellowstone in the mid-1920s due to predator control efforts. Elk herds ballooned over the next 70 years, overgrazing vast tracts of land and trees such as willow and aspen. Fewer trees sent the songbird population into decline. Beavers lost their food source and the lumber to build their dams. The lack of those dams caused streams to erode, making them deeper and not as wide and further degrading the conditions willow need to grow.ⁱ

When wolves were reintroduced, they reduced elk herds so that trees could grow again, and then the populations of songbirds and beavers grew, and the beavers built dams which relieves drought stress and allows floodplain and wetland species to grow. Re-introducing wolves wasn't a silver bullet, and Yellowstone isn't all restored, but it was a good move with cascading benefits, like planting mustard and providing bird habitat. If the kingdom of God is like that mustard seed, it's something you act on that doesn't look like much but is perfectly itself: exactly, humbly and splendidly, like a really great shrub. And its benefits reach more widely than you might expect.

Finally, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman mixed with three measures of flour. Obviously you use just a small amount of yeast relative to the amount of flour, so once again he's drawing our attention to the fact that the kingdom is way more influential than you might think by looking at its manifestations. If we put yeast into three measures of flour we probably couldn't even see it, but it's what makes the flour grow into loaves.

All of this sounds to me like the kingdom of God is inconspicuous, easy to underestimate, and effective beyond what you might expect. The parable of the wheat and the weeds reminds us that we're not the final arbiters of what's worthwhile, so it's okay if we can't always see the outcome of our actions seven steps ahead. And that all reminded me of something Steve and I did a couple of years ago, a project called "Civic Love" sponsored by the National Public Housing Museum. They're doing it again this year, and CCI is also going to do it, both online through Zoom. The idea is that you're paired with a partner, someone you've never met, and you take turns asking each other and answering 36 questions. Questions like "Can you keep a plant alive?" to "Under what circumstances would you call the police on a neighbor?" - *"What sound wakes you at the start of your day?"* to *"What law would you change for the betterment of your community?"* - to test if we can grow civic love.

Civic love is one's love for society, expressed through a commitment to the common good. It is a belief in the idea that we're all better off, when we are all better off. We manifest Civic Love through all kinds of actions—volunteering, marching, speaking against systemic injustice, making reparations—and always with **the love itself** is the emotional heart of the work. bell hooks wrote, *"Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure...This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise."*

I'll let Steve speak for himself, but I was touched and moved by my experience with my partner. Listening to her, I realized that there was this extra person in the world I would never have known about who brings compassion and thoughtfulness to what she does. And I felt listened to as well. It was in itself a powerful experience, but it also pointed to what could

happen if we made a habit of exercising those muscles of asking good questions and listening carefully to the answers. Behind the experiment of civic love is the notion that there is an abundance of good that can come from listening to people we don't know. We discover connection, and we care about each other.

When I participated in Civic Love two years ago, I heard some stories and I told some stories. Not long ones, short ones like "a woman took yeast and mixed it with three measures of flour." They don't have to be long and elaborate to be recognizable and meaningful to the listener, and to create a connection between the teller and the listener. I feel like that's sort of how Jesus' teachings got transmitted--people who found them meaningful re-told them, and in discussing them formed stronger connections. I have to say that I'm just ignoring Matthew's interpretation of the first parable, because I think he's wrong. But if I were in a live conversation with him, I'd be interested to hear more about it. In the case of the civic love experiment, I would suggest that this is a deceptively humble activity with potentially enormous transformative power. As CCI says in its civic love invitation, "People - and building relationships for social change - are the heart of everything we do."

So I'd encourage those of you with an internet connection to sign up for one of these evenings of civic love. Or, if you can't or don't feel like it, just remember what Jesus wants us to remember: God is in charge, and the kingdom shows up in humble but exactly right ways, so let's work with that.

Lord of stories, Jesus taught us through stories and the wisdom of the shared word. Teach us through your stories, that we may learn, grow, and love. For the sake of Jesus Christ we pray.

ⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/2018/09/07/wolves-reintroduction-yellowstone-ecosystem/973658002/>