Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

When I was in second grade we played a lot of “Simon Says”. I wasn’t very good at it. I was okay as long as the pace was slow. Simon says, “Do this.” Simon says, “Do this.” “Do this.” But I had problems as the pace picked up. I was too suggestible for that game. I didn’t always cue into whether or not Simon had actually said it. Fatal flaw. My reaction was quick, but my analysis was poor. Whenever I’d mess up, someone would look over at me and say, “Simon didn’t say!”

I think about that game sometimes when I’m in the middle of discussion or debates with Christian friends and colleagues, on the left and the right, discussing some divisive topic like homosexuality or abortion. We get very worked up about a lot of things; things about which Jesus is remarkably silent. Sometimes when I hear political positions described as “Christian,” whether it’s against gay marriage or in favor of capital punishment, I want to play “Jesus says.” I want to holler out, “Jesus didn’t say!”

Sometimes when I hear debates in the churches, against women priests or gay pastors, I want to say, “think whatever you want about that, just don’t blame it on Jesus.” Even a simple and widely-held belief like “you have to be Christian to be saved” makes me want to turn around and call out, “Jesus didn’t say!”

That would be pretty obnoxious, of course. The only thing that holds me back is knowing that I’m no better at playing “Jesus Says” than anybody else. I’d rather focus our attention on the things Jesus really did say, the things Jesus did care about, the things Jesus longs for us to learn about. Today we hear a lot about Jesus’ favorite topic, the Kingdom of God. And
rather than giving us things to believe about the Kingdom, Jesus gives us little images to play
with, images that are anything but obvious. Don’t you love Jesus?

The Kingdom of Heaven, the realm of God is like . . . A mustard seed.

It’s like some yeast…

It’s like treasure in a field…

It’s like a merchant who finds a pearl…

It’s like a net, catching fish…

That’s a lot of different images, so let’s pick out two as we think together about what
Jesus really did say about God’s work among us and within us. My favorites are the treasure in
the field and the yeast in the bread.

First, the treasure in the field. A person finds the treasure and then hides it again. He’s
so excited and full of joy he sells everything and buys the field. Two things to notice about this
parable. First, you have to want to see the treasure. How many people walked through that field,
I wonder, and never saw a thing.

Yesterday morning I was sitting at a table in Riverside Park drinking my tea, minding my
own business. I took my glasses off and put them on the table, resting my eyes. A guy came up
to me, evidently homeless. Without my glasses I couldn’t tell if I knew him or not, but I smiled
and said Hi just in case. He grumbled and muttered and sat down at the table and stared at me. I
noticed he had one eye swollen shut, and he was staring at me with the other one.

“Hi,” I said again.

He grumbled and muttered – maybe I was at his own personal table? I don’t know. Then
he stuck out his arm and swept my glasses off the table and into the grass. “Those are my
glasses!” I said. Grumble. Mutter. “I can’t see without those!” That got his attention, I think
because of his own vision troubles. A second later we were both on our knees going across the
field, gingerly, two people searching for those glasses. And though neither of us could really see, eventually we saw the glasses. Why? Because we *wanted* to see them.

The kingdom of heaven is like that. It might be all around us. It might be right in front of us. But you won’t see it unless you want to.

The second thing to notice about the treasure in the field is that after you do see it, God’s kingdom, after you do catch a glimpse of God’s realm, it’s a lot easier to find again, even if it’s still hidden. Why? Because: you know where to look.

A lot of us catch a glimpse of the realm of God right here, either at worship on Sunday morning or at the shelter some evening or at the food pantry or the tutoring program. Something we see reminds us of nothing so much as the Kingdom of God. Something we see reminds us of nothing so much as life the way God wants it lived. And once we see it, we want to come back for more. It’s the nature of the Kingdom that catching a glimpse of it just makes us more eager to see it again. And sometimes it seems worth it to shed other things just to buy the field.

The second image that speaks to me out of this smorgasbord of parables is the *woman with the yeast*. She takes a little yeast and puts it in a lot of flour – three measures of flour – a lot of flour; but soon all the flour is leavened.

Three things to notice. In the Biblical tradition, yeast is usually a bad thing. It's a symbol of corruption. Jesus himself later in Matthew tells his followers to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, which before you know it will insinuate itself into your heart and your soul. Jesus is saying there’s something a little dark and hidden about they way the Kingdom of God spreads itself around, insinuating itself into the world--sometimes apart from anything the church does and sometimes in spite of everything the church does. As I said last week, the real of God isn’t confined within the wall of the church. Thank God for that!
The second thing to notice is that three measures of flour is a lot of flour. By my calculation it’s something like 160 cups of flour. That’s a lot of flour and it makes a lot of dough and those few grains of yeast end up causing a lot of rising.

And third, Jesus tells us that the woman “hid” the yeast in the flour. That’s a strange word for what you do with yeast. But it fits. Once the yeast is in the bread you can’t see it, you don’t notice it, you can tell it’s there only by what it does. That’s the way of the realm of God. You won’t see a signpost. You won’t notice the border guards. What people might notice in you, though, once the yeast of the Kingdom starts to work in you, is that you don’t do like you used to do. You don’t act like you used to act.

One hopeful last thing to notice about the Kingdom of God, and then I’m done.

It’s never to late to be a part of it. It’s never too late to make it part of you.

I like cooking outdoors in the courtyard on our dilapidated grills, everything from whole hams to turkeys. There’s something way more fun about cooking when you do it outside. For yesterday’s cookout I had a funny idea. If you can roast a turkey on a grill, why couldn’t you bake bread? It had been a long time since I baked any bread, but I found a simple recipe and I followed it closely and I was at the kneading stage when I had a horrible thought. Yeast.

How ironic, given that I’d been thinking all week about yeast, but I had forgotten to put in the yeast. You’re supposed to add it in the very beginning, mixing it into the dry ingredients. Everyone knows that. That’s what my cookbook said. Even Jesus says that here in this parable. How am I supposed to play “Jesus Says” and play it well when I can’t even get his simplest instructions right?

But I learned something yesterday. Yeast is full of grace. You can get it wrong and still get it right. It’s never too late. And so it is with the Kingdom of God.