

Scavenger Hunt for God Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The kingdom of heaven is like...

We have just read five of Jesus' kingdom parables. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened; "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field; the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind." Each parable tells us about certain qualities or characteristics of the kingdom of God.

Remember that the kingdom of heaven does not simply mean a place we go after we die. For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is primarily a place or time where the reign of God is fulfilled in this world. So, when the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21) God is here and God is still working in the world and among us. God often works in mysterious ways, so it is hidden in plain sight, but we can glimpse the hand of God when God's will is done on our earthly place. We can feel it because the kingdom of God has certain qualities that we can point out!

We have read the five kingdom parables of Jesus. What qualities or characteristics of God's kingdom do you find in these parables? There is no right or wrong answer, so just name them! For me, growth, possibilities, hospitality, abundance, great value, joy, indiscriminate invitation, and of course, righteous judgment in the harvest time. But what stands out for me this time is "hidden and mixed in."

... Like a mustard seed

In the parable of a mustard seed, Jesus said that "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." The small seed with a great possibility of becoming a tree that can be a home for many birds of the air!" But this possibility is hidden in a small seed. Since I haven't seen a mustard seed or tree, I didn't really feel the power of this parable. But during the week, I had a special opportunity to understand the meaning of this parable more deeply in my backyard. As some of you know, Juhee used to love gardening. But since we have Joy, we don't really take care of our vegetable garden. This year, we didn't plant anything because we planned to visit Korea for a month. What surprised us upon our return was that our backyard looked like jungle after a month including our vegetable garden. [ppt] As you can see in this picture, our garden was full of Korean herbs that came from last year's seeds. These herbs became like shrubs and a baby rabbit had made a home under there. Of course, Joy did not like it being there so he chased the poor baby rabbit and almost caught it. [ppt] The size of the seed was very small but it grew large enough to be a home for a vulnerable creature. We should not underestimate the great possibility hidden in a small seed.

Size doesn't matter when it comes to the kingdom of God. During our Lenten season, we made and shared ABC bags of care as a part of our spiritual disciplines. We continue to do this meaningful act of charity and sharing love with our neighbors. I have heard many beautiful

stories about it. Those who receive our ABC bags feel that someone is caring for them. Those who share ABC bags with them also feel immense joy in their hearts. Compared to the needs of our world, ABC bags are small, and don't seem to have any direct impact on the lives of people who receive them, but that small act of love can be a small seed with a great possibility of transformation for someone. We don't know what will grow out of it but it will surely grow. The kingdom of heaven is hidden and mixed in so we may not clearly say "here it is or there it is" but it continues to grow in us and through our small acts of obedience to God's will and love for our neighbors. Yes, the kingdom of God is among us. Can you see the kingdom of God among us?

... Like a pearl merchant!

I know we prefer the obvious. We like to be sure. So, we want to see the results of what we have planted immediately and when we don't see immediate changes or fruit, we are often discouraged. But my friends, Hebrews 11:1 reminds us that faith "is the conviction of things not seen." Like a treasure hidden in a field, or like yeast mixed in the flour, God's grace is often hidden and mixed into our ordinary lives. So, just like a merchant in search of fine pearls, we should search for it, and celebrate it when we discover it. How do we find it and how do we celebrate it? By telling the stories, by pointing it out. How often do you think of what God is doing in your life? How often are you really grateful for what you enjoy? Without intentional effort to attend to God's grace, we often miss the hidden treasure in our lives, in small and ordinary things. When we slow down and look deeply at our ordinary moments, we can find God's grace everywhere even in moments of crisis and suffering.

During the week, I happened to read a book I bought last year. The title of the book is "Nevertheless a Dazzling Season" and it is a Christian personal essay. I am a pastor but honestly, I don't like Christian personal essays because I have seen so many books in which authors become the hero or heroine of their own faith stories. They had extraordinary experiences of God, overcame many challenges of life with faith and eventually were blessed abundantly. However, this book was different. The writer didn't claim that she overcame her suffering and despair. Her life was full of misery, failures, betrayal, poverty and suffering. She was an illegitimate child of a Korean father and Japanese mother. When she was six, she was brought to Korea and lived with his father's family. She had a stepmother and stepsiblings but they never become a real family for her. After her father went bankrupt, the family was separated and she only saw her stepsister once after because her step-sister had become a shaman performing fortune-telling and she couldn't communicate with spirits when the author was with her so she didn't want to meet her. Her first marriage failed so she became a single mom raising two kids. After she became a youth pastor, she completely devoted her time and energy to ministry. She worked 24/7 for her church. Luckily, she met her current husband while they worked together for a ministry of preventing suicide. When she decided to marry him, she shared her intention with the lead pastor of her church. The lead pastor opposed her marriage because he thought she could not commit herself fully to ministry any longer if she got married, and fired her from her ministry. It was a devastating decision for her because ministry was everything to her. She prayed to God, 'why?' but all that she heard was the silence of God. Some nights the silence from God was so heavy that she felt like she would break under its weight. Unfortunately, right after she was fired, she was diagnosed with 'Borderline ovarian tumors.' Can you find God's grace in her life? She felt like she was abandoned and all her efforts in ministry were in vain. In that moment, she heard a whisper from God, "this is why I am stopping you." Then she realized that if she had not been fired, she would not have discovered the tumors in her body. She was

able to discover grace even in her suffering and even in her moment of despair. The presence of God in our lives is not always dramatic, but God is always with us like our breath. God embraces us when we feel abandoned, and defeated and helps us live through each day, one after another. That grace is available for us and we need to search for it.

Scavenger Hunt

Simply knowing that hidden and mixed grace is around us is a blessing and can change our lives. During my kindergarten years, I once went on a picnic at a park. A park is a park and there was nothing special about it. We played fun games like Duck Duck Goose and Spot the candy in the flour, but the highlight of the picnic was a treasure hunt. While the kids were busy having lunch, the teachers quietly hid small folded papers among the trees and grass. The papers had either a "O" or an "X" marked on them. The children who found an "X" had to search around again to find other hidden treasures. After completing the treasure hunt, we received a simple gift of one pencil and one notebook, but I still remember the joy of searching for the treasure, running around and sweating all over the place. The hidden treasure had the power to transform an ordinary space into a special place. The same is true of God's grace. It is hidden and mixed in our lives and we can find it! Yes. It's time for real treasure hunting! Isn't it exciting to play scavenger hunt for God? The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in our ordinary lives. Let us play this exciting and grateful game! Amen.