

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like . . .”

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Patricia Bulkley is a hospice chaplain with many years of experience. She’s heard many hospice patients over the years report vivid dreams they experience in the last days of their lives. Patricia collected some of the dream stories she has heard over the years, and teamed up with her son, Kelly — a psychologist — to analyze them. The result is their book, *Dreaming Beyond Death*.¹

Charles Rasmussen was a retired sea captain, who was dying of cancer. He was filled with fears about his dying until, one night, he dreamed of sailing on the high seas. He felt the same thrill he’d often known as a merchant-marine captain, sailing his ship at night through a black and empty sea, knowing he was on course. “Strangely enough,” Captain Rasmussen told the hospice chaplain, “I’m not afraid to die anymore.”

A woman patient told of how she dreamed of a candle, burning on the windowsill of her hospital room. Suddenly, the candle was snuffed out, engulfing her in darkness. For a moment she was filled with terror — until, in her dream, she saw the candle spontaneously re-light, but this time *outside* her window.

Another female patient, a cancer victim, was struggling with doubts about the existence of God. For three nights in a row, an image appeared in her dreams: a collection of huge boulders that pulsed with an eerie blue light. Reflecting on the meaning of this strange image, she knew intuitively that the boulders were symbols of a divine being, who was very real. “I don’t need to know anything more than that,” she told the chaplain. “God is God.” Then, the night before she died, the woman had a final dream. It began the same way as the others had

begun, but then the boulders morphed into stepping-stones. In the distance, she could see a golden light. “It’s calling me now, and I want to go,” she told the chaplain. She died the next day.

Then there’s the story of the great psychologist, Carl Jung. Jung had spent a lifetime helping patients analyze their dreams, and he’d recorded quite a few of his own. The very last dream he communicated to his followers was of a great round stone. It had these words chiseled into it: “And this shall be a sign unto you of Wholeness and Oneness.” Jung took it to mean that his life’s work had been completed.

The Bulkleys make the point, in their book, that these dreams don’t prove that heaven exists. They’re dreams, after all. They originate within the human mind. But they do speak powerfully of our hopes and aspirations as human beings. And for those family members and friends who are left behind, they’re powerfully suggestive signs of what life beyond this life may be like.

In Matthew, chapter 13, Jesus speaks not of dreams, but of visions that are parables. Most of Jesus’ best-known parables are stories — the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the laborers in the vineyard. But not these. The parables at the end of Matthew 13 are brief, evocative snapshots, presented in a rapid-fire fashion.

Each of them, in its own way, provides an answer to the question, “What is the kingdom of heaven?” But these parables don’t directly answer the question, “What is heaven?” Jesus is speaking here about the *kingdom* of heaven, the heavenly rule over all things. There’s a difference, although not a huge one.

The kingdom of heaven is not so much a spiritual reality beyond this world, as a spiritual reality that's *breaking into* this world. For Jesus — as for many wise, spiritual teachers — the boundary line between earth and heaven is thin. In the gospels, Jesus begins his preaching ministry by proclaiming, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; 10:7). His mission is to wake people up and make them aware of this dazzling new reality and the nearness of God in daily life.

Such is the message of these mini parables in Matthew 13. Here's the first one:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 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” (Matthew 13:31).

A mustard seed is a tiny seed, but it grows rapidly, maturing into a very large plant. Some biblical scholars think Jesus' mustard plant is what the botanists call “black mustard” — more of a shrub, really, than a plant. Occasionally, it grows as large as 6 feet tall.² Black mustard is essentially a weed — the sort of plant gardeners with a sense of humor refer to as a “volunteer.” No self-respecting farmers would let it grow up in their fields. Once established, it's difficult to root out.

But here's what's different in Jesus' parable. In his rendition, the farmer *intentionally* sows the mustard seeds! “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field ...” Go figure! It's like Jesus is saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a bunch of dandelion seeds that someone sowed on the front lawn.”

Why would anyone go and do a crazy thing like that — sowing dandelion seeds? Anyone who's ever knelt on a lawn with gardening gloves and one of those little rooting-out tools knows how

rapidly they spread, and how persistent they are. But maybe that's *exactly* what Jesus is trying to tell us about God's heavenly realm! The seeds of heaven may seem tiny and insignificant, but once they take root in the ground, there's no stopping them.

The next parable is similar:

“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” (Matthew 13:33).

Anyone who has ever baked bread knows what yeast can do. Sprinkle the tiniest bit of the stuff into your wet dough, knead it thoroughly, and let it sit for an hour or so in a warm place. Then place your loaf in the oven, and before you know it, it has doubled, even tripled in size. That wet, unappetizing lump of goo has been miraculously transformed into a warm, crusty loaf. Break it open while it's still warm, and you'll see that Jesus is right. The steamy fragrance is like a little bit of heaven.

So, the influence of heaven is slowly growing in our world, just as a yeasty loaf expands in the oven. But Jesus is saying even more than that. The woman, in his parable, mixes the yeast with *three measures* of flour. That's an enormous quantity: about 50 pounds. This baker is no housewife, serving up a single loaf for her family's dinner. She's running a big commercial operation. The bread baked from that amount of dough would feed more than a hundred people.³ It starts with a tiny, insignificant pinch of leaven: and look at the result! In just such a way, the inbreaking reality of heaven has the power to transform the world.

The lectionary reading then skips over some explanatory verses about the nature of parables to get to a series of three more mini parables. All of them likewise have to do with the

kingdom of heaven. Jesus delivers them in rapid-fire fashion, one after the other, supplying little in the way of explanation. Here's the first one:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44).

Imagine an agricultural laborer — a farm worker — pushing a plow behind a pair of oxen. The sun is high overhead, the day is hot and he's growing weary. Suddenly, he hears the sound of metal on metal, looks down, and sees something gold glinting back at him. His plowshare has broken into a clay jar, buried in the ground. The jar is filled with gold coins, hundreds of years old — way too many for him to pick up and take home.

So, what does the farm worker do? He covers the treasure over with dirt. Then he runs home and scrapes together all his savings. He goes to all his friends and relatives, cajoling them into loaning him all their cash for a sure-fire investment. Then he goes to the farmer who owns the field and makes him an offer for the property.

The farmhand holds his breath while the man considers it — it's all he can do to conceal his excitement — and when the farmer finally agrees, the farmhand hands over the purchase price in a businesslike way. Inside, he's bursting with happiness. His heart is racing, for he knows the treasure in the field is his at last!

The next parable also has a commercial setting:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46).

Think of it, though, as a modern tale. An antiques dealer is making the rounds of the Saturday garage sales, looking for merchandise. He's hoping to find some costume jewelry, something he

can display in his shop and sell for a few bucks. It's late morning — well past the time for turning up spectacular bargains. He's about to call it a day when he spies out his car window a few more tables on yet another front lawn. On impulse, he pulls his car to the curb, gets out, and walks over to look.

He sees it immediately, gleaming translucently back at him: a huge pearl pendant on a chain, the largest he has ever seen. He picks it up, looking it over with his practiced eye. It's unquestionably genuine: and it has to be worth tens of thousands of dollars. Casually, he asks the owner how much she wants for it.

The owner obviously knows she has something of value, but she doesn't know how much. "A hundred dollars," she says. "And not a penny less."

The dealer reaches into his pocket. Twenty dollars is all he has left. He thanks the woman, walks casually back to his car, and races to the nearest ATM. He returns to the garage sale a few minutes later, just as the homeowner is folding up her tables. There's cold worry in the pit of his stomach. His heart is racing. "Please, let the pearl still be there," he mutters to himself. It *is* there. He buys it and returns home rejoicing.

A treasure buried in a field. An undervalued pearl, just waiting for a knowledgeable buyer. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus is saying, is already present in our world, hiding in plain sight, but in such a way that not everyone can see it. Having glimpsed its presence, we have only to reach out and claim it for our own.

The final parable belongs to the world of fishing:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad” (Matthew 13:47-48).

Here, too, the gifts of God — the signs of the inbreaking kingdom of heaven — are present among us in great abundance. Anyone who has ever taken a fishing pole in hand knows the feeling of casting a line into the water again and again, hoping to reel it back in with some weight on the end of it. In Jesus’ parable, it’s a net rather than a line, and it comes back bulging with silvery treasure. In fishing, every cast is an act of faith. The vast majority of casts yield no results. But it only takes one to make the day worthwhile.

Jesus then surprises us, by changing the explanation of this parable. We began by looking at it from the standpoint of those who are casting the net; but he informs us that, in this story, we’re not the fishers, but the fish. The keepers must be separated from those that have to be thrown back. “Thy kingdom come,” we pray, in the Lord’s Prayer. Yet there’s also the matter of “Thy will be done” — divine judgment.

So, what *is* the kingdom of heaven like? A mustard seed. Leaven in a batch of dough. A treasure hidden in a field. A pearl of great price. A net bulging with fish. This is no theological treatise Jesus gives us. It’s more like a pile of snapshots. Far from providing a street map of heaven, these parables are mere hints. These hints are the best he — or anyone else — could ever offer, for the fault lies not in the explanation, but in the feeble understanding of the listeners.

How could our small, timebound human minds possibly take in the reality of God's eternal realm? The best any of us can do is to trade — as Jesus does — in parables and dreamlike imagery, trusting that one day, all will be revealed.

The Buddhist philosopher Alan Watts has written, in a way that speaks to every religious tradition:

You cannot understand life and its mysteries as long as you try to grasp it. Indeed, you cannot grasp it, just as you cannot walk off with a river in a bucket. . . . To have running water you must let go of it and let it run. The same is true of life and of God.⁴

Heaven, we must admit, is a mystery. Yet, as the hospice chaplain discovered in listening to the secrets of the dying, it is in dreams, visions and parables that we discern the deepest and most profound truths pertaining to this life and the life that is to come.

May the peace of God . . .

#793 – Be Thou My Vision