

My friends have a board game I've played a couple times called *Hues and Cues*; the board is a gradient rainbow with a grid superimposed on it so that each square is a slightly different shade than the squares around it. You draw a card that gives the coordinates of one of those squares, and you have to come up with a two or three word clue—that does not use a color word—to get everyone to guess the square. So you couldn't say "yellow" but, depending on the hue, you might say "butter" or "daffodil" or "egg yolk". If nobody gets it on the first try, you give a second clue, and points go both to whoever guesses closest and to the person giving the clues. It's fun to see the creativity people use in picking their clues. But what is really fun is when disagreements arise: *That's not the color of grass. What kind of grass grows in your yard? You better get some better fertilizer. Haven't you ever seen grass before?* And the discussions get lively. I thought of that game as the lectionary has now given us a third week of parables, Jesus saying *The kingdom of heaven is like...* then something that doesn't seem at all like what we would expect the kingdom of heaven to be like: a sower scattering seeds on all sorts of soil, a landowner sowing good seed while an enemy sows weeds, a mustard seed that becomes the greatest of shrubs, yeast a woman hid in tons of flour, treasure hidden in a field, a merchant who found one pearl of great value and sold everything to buy it, a net that caught fish of every kind...I imagine the crowds and the disciples, like me and my friends gathered around that board game, saying to Jesus, *That's not what a kingdom is like. What kind of kingdom are you talking about? Haven't you ever seen a kingdom before?*

But of course, Jesus and the people of Israel *had* seen kingdoms before—lots of them. It was not God's intention that the people, having just been freed from slavery under Egyptian rule, should have an earthly king over them; God was to be their only king. But although Israel was supposed to be a beacon on a hill, an example to all the other nations, the people rebelled and asked the Lord for a king so they could be *like* the other nations. God warns them that it's a bad idea but eventually grants their request and chooses Saul and then David to rule over them. Just as the Lord predicted, the kings of Israel and Judah become corrupt and exploit their people, so they have to be censured by the prophets and conquered by the neighboring nations to restore justice. So Jesus and his fellow Israelites knew what kingdoms were like: their own, but also the kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now Rome who oppressed them. Those kingdoms were not like seeds or weeds or yeast or pearls. That's why Jesus tells these strange and compelling parables; the kingdom of heaven is *not* like all the kingdoms of the world that the people had seen before.

We could be here until Tuesday talking about just one of these examples, but we won't: instead we'll look at them all but briefly. The first today is the mustard seed that someone sows in his field. That smallest of seeds becomes a tree so that the birds of the air nest in its branches. Mustard is a good, useful plant for human consumption; it makes food tasty and was probably used medicinally in the ancient world. But the result of this planting is that the birds—part of the natural world—seem to benefit just as much as the one who

planted the seeds. Different from the kingdoms of the world, which more often bleed the environment for human consumption than do anything to protect or provide for other creatures.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. Three measures was a huge amount of flour, and the woman hid—not mixed—the yeast—not the packets of Fleischmann's in your fridge but sourdough starter. It would have made more bread than she could ever eat herself—enough for everyone in town. The kingdoms of the world always seem to work on the premise of scarcity—that there's not enough to go around, so we better take care of ourselves and our own. But the kingdom of heaven works on the premise of abundance—that one person's act of sharing—even a messy, mundane, hidden act—can and should provide for the whole community.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, found and reburied by a man who joyfully sells all he has to buy it. Whereas he seems to have found that treasure by accident, the merchant was searching for fine pearls when he found just the one of great value and sold all he had to buy it. Assuming the treasure was still buried in the field, the first man would have made a good deal in his buying and selling; we have to wonder what the merchant had for supper now that all he owns is one really nice pearl. But in both cases, it is not a kingdom-of-the-world move to sell all our possessions, even in pursuit of something precious. It's in the kingdom of heaven where the treasure we have stored up can't be consumed by moth or rust.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that caught fish of every kind; once it's ashore the good are put into baskets—which, frankly isn't so great for the fish—and the bad are thrown out. In just about every kingdom in the world, someone is singularly focused on dividing out the good and the bad. It's in the kingdom of heaven where all are brought together and the task of separating out the good and bad is not considered a human responsibility but is left up to the Lord to judge.

*Have you understood all this?* Jesus asks. *Oh, yeah, sure, you betcha, we understand,* the disciples say. OK. But it is our life-long task to understand better and better the ways in which the kingdom of heaven is different from our world—how God's values are different and therefore how we are called to live differently than the money-, power-, and prestige-hungry culture around us. The disciples, and we, know what worldly kingdoms look like. But Jesus tells us, in as many weird ways as it takes, that God does not intend for us to live, even to live well, in the kingdom of this world, but to be subjects of God's very different kingdom.

The sermon almost stopped right there. I wrote this the other day in Panera while I was waiting for my new dog to finish his trial at doggie day camp, and I had closed my laptop, packed up my books, and was getting a refill on my lemonade, when I read the back of the t-shirt of the guy in front of me at the drink station: it had a picture of a cross, a flag, and a military style rifle, and it said *be a lion, not a sheep*. That's life defined by the kingdoms of this world, and we are free to live that way, but we can't faithfully call that the kingdom of Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, from whom we ask and receive mercy. So here's where we're ending today: may we stop trying to seat Jesus on the thrones of this world's kingdoms, and instead may we change our perspective so we can follow faithfully where the King of Heaven leads.