

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Year A

July 26, 2020

North Fork Ministries

Gospel:

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "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."

He told them another parable: "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, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"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.

"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. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

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It is common among Christians, especially evangelical Christians, to think that the Kingdom of Heaven refers to the afterlife, where you go when you die, provided you have been "saved". However, Jesus points out repeatedly that "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" or "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" – that is, here and now. We have access to the Kingdom of Heaven in this very moment. As Cynthia Bourgeault says about the Kingdom of Heaven, "You don't die into it. You awaken into it."

People also imagine that Jesus is describing a hoped-for Kingdom on this earth – one in which peace and justice might reign supreme. A world of equality and harmonious contentment. Working to create such a kingdom is a worthy endeavor, but so far, our

attempts to create utopias on earth haven't worked out too well. And while Jesus' followers were eager for him to put on a crown and live into their vision of what a Messiah should be, Jesus assured them that "My kingdom is not of this world." Throughout the gospels, Jesus reveals himself to be a wisdom teacher, not the new Moses or the new King David.

Let me suggest that Jesus is using the Kingdom of Heaven metaphorically. The kingdom represents a new state of consciousness, a transformed awareness that enables us to look at the world in a completely different way.

In one of the parables we read this morning, Jesus said, "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."

During the season of Corona, many people have started baking bread. So many, in fact, that earlier this year, it was difficult to find yeast. So lacking yeast, many people made sour dough starters to use as the leavening agent in their bread recipe. I suspect that more than a few refrigerators are now getting crowded because the expanding sour dough starter has spilled over from the container it once occupied and the starter's starter, the would-be baker, has more leavening than she can ever use.

Humans have been using yeast for around 10,000 years. Yet yeast, the fungi that allow fermentation, the molecular process through which cells convert sugar into more complex molecules, existed for millions of years before humans walked the earth. Since its discovery, the fermentation process has been used to not only produce bread, but cheese, and beer and spirits and yogurt and kimchi and kombucha. And single-celled organisms like yeast, bacteria and algae are used to produce life-saving drugs, ethanol and even fragrances.

These organisms are all types of fungi that existed long before the first plants ever took root on earth's soil. I've been reading a new book by a young scientist with the imagination of a poet named Merlin Sheldrake, called *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our World, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures*.

Plants grab our attention because they are so visible. They shade us, shelter us, clothe us, and feed us. Yet without fungi, as Sheldrake points out, many of the plants we take for granted wouldn't exist. If you give fungi any thought at all, you probably think of the mushrooms that pop up on your lawn after a summer rain or the portabella's that adorn your dinner plate. But mushrooms are just the visible flowering tip of a far-reaching underground fungal universe. The largest recorded fungal network is found in Oregon. It's a network that extends over four square miles and is thousands of years old.

These fungal networks are called mycelium. Mycelium is like yeast (both are fungi), but unlike most yeast cells, which grow as a single cell, mycelium is multicellular and can grow

into macro-size structures. Mycelium is made up of tubular cells, that branch and tangle and spread over vast distances. And across these distances they produce very complex structures so small that they can only be seen under a microscope.

Plants and fungi form an intricate, mutually dependent, symbiotic relationship. Overlapping networks of plants and fungi are coupled together underground. Nutrients can pass from plant to plant through the fungi. Miraculously a less shaded plant, a donor plant, is able to pass carbon to a more shaded plant – a receiver plant that needs it more. Very few plants can live without their fungal partners. And it all takes place hidden underground. As was written in the Gospel of Thomas: “the Father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and the people don’t see it.”

This social network of plants is sometimes called “the wood-wide web.” This picture of the biological world, and the network of fungi in particular, force us to rethink some of our assumptions about individuality. We too are made up of microbial organisms. We carry within our bodies more microbial cells than our own. And we are dependent upon them. Even within our own bodies the idea of being an individual is called into question. We are more deeply interconnected with creation than we ever might imagine. Perhaps we can learn to exist on this planet in new ways by recognizing just how interconnected we all are. By finding the divine in the everyday. By daily attendance at the sacred meeting of the divine and the natural world.

Jim Marion, in his book *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, writes that the Kingdom of Heaven is Jesus’ way of describing a state of “nondual consciousness” or “unitive consciousness.” A characteristic of this kind of awareness is that it sees no separation between God and humans, nor between humans and other humans. And neither, I would suggest, between humans and the microbial world that surrounds and inhabits us.

The great mystic, Meister Eckhart’s once said, “Each person has a vintage wine cellar, and they seldom drink from it.” Once you have a taste of that vintage wine, a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, the taster is eager to sell all he has and buy that treasure-filled field or that precious pearl. Think of the pearl as a life-giving connection with the Divine. A pearl of great value that began its formation as an irritating grain of sand inside the body of an oyster. And the parable of the mustard seed illustrates the interconnection between the seed, the farmer, the plant, and the bird’s home. An intertwining of sacred ecology.

Each of these parables points us to the realization that we are all one. And not just humankind, but animals and plants and, yes, mycelium.

The question I would like to leave you with is this: How do we live into the realization that we are indeed all one? Here is a hint: I think it is about ego transcendence. Jesus was offering examples of how we can see our interconnectedness and use that understanding to help enable us to transcend our ego and displace our human-centric view of the world. Jesus is using his parables to lead us toward the transcendent.

And Jesus asked his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” And the disciples answered, “Yes.” Jesus’ reply to them, and perhaps to us, is about how a scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven, is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure that which is old and that which is new. We are scribes in training – for the kingdom of heaven.