



What Do These Have in Common?
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Sower, tares, mustard seed, leaven, hidden treasure, pearl, net, scribe – What do these have in common? Each is one of eight parables presented in succession in Matthew 13. These, along with all the other parables of Jesus, are short figurative analogies similar to fables, which, like the lengthy allegories and legends throughout the Old Testament, are intended to communicate timeless spiritual messages. The enduring nature of Biblical teachings is owing in general to their inspiration by the Holy Ghost and in particular to their innate quality of universal, eternal application. They are as old as old can be, yet fresh and new each time they cross our minds.

Parables are like windows into heaven.

Jesus saith unto them, Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea, Lord.
(*Matthew 13:51 KJV*)

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” (*Matthew 13:51 NRSV*)

The Gospel readings for the last two Sundays have respectively included the lengthier Parables of the Sower and of the Tares, along with their explanations. This week’s reading includes the other six (or five for those who count the similitude about the scribe as a continuation of the Parable of the Net). As did the longer parables, these other six briefly compare the kingdom, or kin-dom, of heaven to something small that grows over time into something big, in the process revealing its truly great value that may have been otherwise overlooked.

In her article, “The Parables,” Madeline Boucher references an earlier observation by M.J. Lagrange “that the purpose of a parable is to strike the imagination, to pique the curiosity, to make the listener reflect and work to arrive at the meaning, but only so that the lesson will be more deeply engraved on the mind.”¹

All eight of these parables give us something to think about if we are so inclined, or something to ignore if that is our preference. When the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables, he told them, “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.”² The difference, perhaps the *only* difference, between those to whom the mysteries are revealed and those from whom they are concealed is their own desire to be a part of the kind of society Jesus preached and exemplified. Those who believe in Jesus -- that is, those who believe in his vision for humanity, not just the religious dogma about his divinity -- will also be interested in thinking about what he said and exploring with each other the meaning of his parables. Everyone else will just have to wait until they are ready.

John Wesley, in his *Explanatory Notes*, wrote that the effect of the same parables is different for everyone. He observed, “The truths [of the parables are] delivered to sink the deeper into humble and serious hearers. At the same time, by an awful mixture of justice and mercy, it hid them from the proud and careless.”³

Another thing these parables have in common is that they, along with all of Jesus’ other teachings, are entrusted to the care of those who understand them – at least who understand that they have a spiritual significance. Presumably, that means us, as well as those first disciples. We hear the parables and perceive this common thread running through them that the kin-dom of heaven is like the principles the parables are communicating. We are entrusted to preserve these teachings, and we

are entrusted to pass them on to others.

Briefly stated we spread the seeds of kindness and love wherever we go, trusting God with the results. We let what seems to be the weeds grow alongside what seems to be wheat, trusting God to sort it all out in the end. We take encouragement knowing that our faith and that of others, even if it is like the tiniest mustard seed, will eventually grow into something much larger and more useful. We see the teachings of Jesus spreading through relationships around the world and through the generations. We recognize the great value of, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, laying up our treasure in heaven,⁴ even while that heaven is obscure. We realize that Heaven is more precious than anything the world may offer. We network with others to fully include everyone in the life and ministry of the church. We generously share the vision and teachings of Jesus.

This last parable about generously sharing the vision and teachings of Christ came in response to the disciple's affirmation that they did "understand all these things" Jesus was talking about. Their (and our) declaration of apparent understanding conveys the idea, as defined in the *New Testament Greek Lexicon*, of "the perception with the thing perceived... to set or join together in the mind."⁵ Jesus seemed to take them at their word, but the scene is similar to another later in Matthew 20 when Jesus said, "Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able."⁶ But then, as it turns out, they were not able, and they scattered in the face of the Crucifixion. Still, after the Resurrection, they regrouped, and under the power of the Holy Spirit, they did *become* able. Earl Marlatt wrote this refrain in his hymn, "Are Ye Able Said the Master,"

Lord, we are able.
Our spirits are Thine.
Remold them, make us,
Like Thee, divine.
Thy guiding radiance
Above us shall be
A beacon to God,
To love, and loyalty.

Understanding and discernment are vital to self-governance and community leadership.

Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people? (*1 Kings 3:9 KJV*)

Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?" (*1 Kings 3:9 NRSV*)

Solomon was the third king after the period when Israel was governed by judges. After ascending to the throne of his father David, Solomon famously prayed for wisdom when during a dream, God offered him whatever he might desire. Because Solomon asked for an understanding heart, God promised to give him all the other things he could have asked for in addition to wisdom.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about laying up treasures in heaven and using lilies of the field as an example of God's providence he said, "Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."⁷ Then he gave the principle, echoing the request and response of Solomon and God in this passage, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."⁸

Sometimes, that's easier said than done. On one hand, anyone can pray and try to keep the teachings of Jesus in whatever straits they find themselves. On the other hand, think how much harder it must be for those who are suffering under oppression. Each time God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go," it was "so they can worship."⁹ Imagine a migrant family running for their lives from violence and war, an impoverished family struggling to find food, shelter, and medical care, or a victim of human traffickers forced into slavery, or any other of the most horrible conditions of humanity. Even if we scale that back to the less horrific examples, it is still difficult to imagine how hard it could be to do the things we consider "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" while struggling to make ends meet.

Just think how much better the world could be if more politicians shared the desire Solomon expressed in this prayer for "an understanding mind to govern [God's] people, able to discern between good and evil." Some do, and some don't. We each have a responsibility to cast our votes for those who at least express a desire to govern wisely for the benefit of all God's people. We also each have a responsibility to pray for our leaders, whether or not we support their platforms, and ask God to grant them wisdom whether they want it or not. Even the best leaders are up against formidable opposition at home and abroad. That's the reason Paul gave for his metaphor of putting on "the whole armor of God... For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."¹⁰

How well Solomon employed the wisdom God gave him in governing has long been debated. But then, any of us might be able to identify questionable moments in our own lives on how well we have employed our God-given wisdom, too. When we have questions about ourselves or others, we can always ask for a more understanding heart for everyone concerned. Perhaps the more we "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," the more burdens and barriers will be lifted for others to be able to do the same, and "all these other things will be added" as well.

With the Psalmist, we pray for deliverance from oppression so we can implement the teachings of Jesus in our lives and society.

Deliver me from the oppression of man: so will I keep thy precepts. (*Psalm 119:134 KJV*)

Redeem me from human oppression, that I may keep your precepts. (*Psalm 119:134 NRSV*)

Rescue me from the grip of bad men and women so I can live life your way. (*Psalm 119:134 MSG*)

Jesus preached the parables during a time of severe oppression. Religious factions capitulated to the whims of the violently brutal authoritarian government. A vast gulf separated the rich from the poor, as illustrated by the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The people of Israel had endured this kind of tyranny many times throughout their ancient history. Yet Jesus was emphatic that Heaven is a spiritual kingdom, within and among us. His central command was love, and his precepts addressed personal relationships among people between each other and with God.

Nothing at all can separate any of us from God's love.

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (*Romans 8:38-39 KJV*)

One of several creeds in The United Methodist Hymnal is composed of this passage of Scripture.¹¹ Paul's affirmation of faith crowns a litany of some of the most powerful theological foundations in all of his writings. Today's Epistle reading begins with Paul's assurance that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. She understands and interprets even our "groanings which cannot be uttered."¹² Paul confirmed that "all things work together for good to them that love God."¹³ He added a few controversial statements about predestination, which have been widely and wildly interpreted ever since. Paul said that God predestined everyone "to be conformed to the image of his Son." As it says in the King James Version, God foreknew us, God gave us this destiny, God calls us, God justifies us, and God will glorify us. Here's how John Wesley put it at the conclusion of his sermon entitled "On Predestination:"¹⁴

What is it, then, that we learn from this whole account? It is this, and no more: -- (1) God knows all believers; (2) wills that they should be saved from sin; (3) to that end, justifies them, (4) sanctifies and (5) takes them to glory.

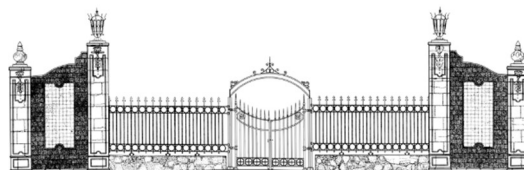
While his readers are still wrapping their minds around those joyful promises, Paul's epistle to the Romans captivates our minds and enraptures our hearts with the eternal conviction that nothing can ever separate any of us from God's love in Christ. This is a fascinating, enchanting, and inviting assertion to read from the various translations. Here is how it is phrased in The Message:

I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.¹⁵

Conclusion

The wisdom of the Scriptures is in the discernment by which they are applied to any present situation. The imagery of the Bible provides a limitless cache of metaphors through which the Holy Spirit continuously speaks as she guides us, as Jesus promised, "into all truth."¹⁶ God's love, as demonstrated in Jesus, invites the broadest possible perception, in contrast to any efforts to narrow and restrict our understanding of the Scriptures to arbitrary boundaries. What do these parables of Jesus have in common? They are like windows into Heaven.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Bible Readings for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
1 Kings 3:5-12, Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33 & 44-52

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⁸ Matthew 6:33 (KJV).

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¹⁵ Romans 8:38-39 (MSG).

¹⁶ John 16:13 (KJV).

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