

July 24, 2011 6th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Decades ago Ivory Soap advertised itself as being, "99 and 44/100 percent pure. So pure it floats." Well if you know anything about soap you know that the reason Ivory Soap floats has nothing to do with its purity. As I understand the story the reason it floats is the result of an employee of Proctor and Gamble (who makes Ivory) who made a mistake and tried to cover it up. Apparently he wasn't paying attention at work and the manufacturing process went wrong. A machine for mixing soap ingredients was left on too long and instead of just mixing the ingredients it whipped them, adding air. The employee discovered what happened, and fearing for his job decided to cover it up. He covered it up by packaging the defective soap and shipping it for sale as if it were normal. But it wasn't normal. And customers noticed. But rather than being angry about being shorted on the weight of soap they thought they had bought they were begging for more. They asked more of this floating soap. An attempt to hide an error brought about the fame of the world's most successful soap.

This quirky unexpectedness is the type of thing we find in our parables from Jesus today too. If you've been following the gospel readings the last few weeks you'll remember that we've been reading from the 13th chapter of Matthew. It is a series of parables and interpretations from Jesus. Like all parables, the parables in Chapter 13 play on extremes, stretch the realm of possibility, and are more than just a little bit silly. Two weeks ago we had the parable of the sower who was scattering valuable seed everywhere, including the middle of the road and on rocks. Last week we had the parable of the wheat and the weeds and you may remember the list of 8 things from commentator Eugene Boring about that parable that are completely ridiculous. Today's parables aren't so much ridiculous, but they are similarly mindbending.

If you're familiar with the parable of the mustard seed you've probably heard it interpreted to mean that with God all things are possible. Also, don't judge the power of something based on its size. God can do great things with tiny resources. I think this is an accurate interpretation of the parable, but there is also more.

I think Jesus is playing on the ridiculous here too. Mustard is not the smallest of seeds and the mustard plant isn't a tree at all. It is an annual shrub, and more of a weed than anything. Mustard only grows about six feet tall at most. The symbol of the cedar tree is the Bible's usual image of success and greatness. Ezekiel 17:23 the noble cedar provides the kind of shelter birds need, not mustard. So Jesus is providing a stark and surprising contrast. Instead of speaking of greatness, this silly shrub is the symbol of God's mighty kingdom. It's almost scandalous.

The parable of the yeast is a similar scandal. When we read this we imagine a woman opening a little packet of yeast and carefully measuring it into three measures of flour to make bread. But yeast didn't come in little packets in those days. Yeast was, and still is, mold; a molding lump of bread. Yeast was usually a symbol of corruption. And our Bible translations get it wrong when they say this woman mixed in yeast into flour. Literally it is that she "hid" the yeast in the flour. You have the idea of someone up to no good trying to hide filth so that no one else finds out. And three measures of flour is not just three cups of flour. Biblical interpreters all note that these

three measures of flour is really enough flour to make 100 to 150 loaves of bread.

Once again, like the parable of the mustard seed, this parable is about a tiny insignificant thing leading up to tremendous results, but again it is not a clean and pure image. I don't want someone hiding mold in the flour used to make my bread! But this unclean and perhaps scandalous image of how the kingdom of God works shows that God can work in hidden and unexpected ways - certainly ways that are outside the realm of a sterile clean state board of health certified kitchen. No religious board of health would be too happy about this dirt showing up in the food!

The parable of the treasure in the field also has a dark side to it. Is it ethical to buy something from someone when you're hiding the true value of something from the seller. Last year an art dealer found an original of a famous artist for sale at a Goodwill store for \$10. Goodwill thought the frame was worth that and the art worth nothing. But rather than thinking he'd stumbled into the find of his life the art dealer informed

the store of the real value of the painting and did not buy it. Isn't that righteous living? What is this sneaky bit?

There isn't anything sneaky about the parable of the pearl, but we wonder about what is going through someone's mind that they'd sell everything to buy a single thing. Perhaps this isn't unethical behavior but it is hardly a smart thing to do!

As we attempt to interpret these strange teachings let's remember that they are parables. And like all parables they have multiple levels of meaning that hit us all at the same time.

On one level is the standard interpretation. Mustard seeds and yeast produce far more than you'd expect based on their size. God can do amazing things with seemingly insignificant things. And fields with treasure and pearls of great price do remind us of the cost of discipleship; plus the importance of having a single minded purpose when it comes to discipleship. We are right to understand these parables teach us that we should seek God's kingdom above all other things, in fact forsake all other things for the sake of the gospel.

But there is the other level of equal value in interpretation you get by reversing them. You'd expect God to work through the great cedar tree. But God comes as a scandalous mustard plant. Mold and corruption of yeast symbolize the cursed and scandalous cross God endured for you. Your salvation didn't come off as a neat and clean affair. It was messy business, getting into the filth and mold of this world. Yet its power leavens your lives.

Reverse also the treasure and pearl parables. What if they are also about what God has done for you? What if God has discovered that you are a hidden treasure that the world is overlooking? So God sells all that He has in order to buy you. What if you are a pearl of such great price that it drives God to do anything in order to acquire you?

These are equally valid and powerful interpretations of these parables. These parables mean both things - both sides. Ultimately they give us hope. And let's get this hope in the right order.

Because God sees you as so valuable, and because God seeks you so diligently you know your spot in his love is secure. Therefore you live in hope and with security. And that hope and security is a lot like a mustard seed or some yeast leavening several lumps.

Let's face it, we live in a society of corruption and lies. You are told what you want to hear in order to buy your vote. You are given cheap promises and facades of glamour to get you to buy someone's product. You can't trust many people because you can't tell if they are just trying to steal your job or get inside information from you. But in this world you live a life of truth and honesty. You have no need to play the games of money and politics. You have no need to manipulate and control. You are free to live as God made you to be - honest, sincere, trustworthy, genuine and true.

That may not seem like much. But then again neither is a mustard seed or some yeast. Yet they yield amazing results. You are the hope of the world. By God you can do it. Live that hope so that others may find hope through you. Amen