

## Mustard Seeds, Yeast, and Pearls

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Matthew 13:31-33; 44-53  
July 24, 2011

When I was about 7 or 8, my grandfather gave me an unusual gift for my birthday. It was a tiny yellow speck, floating in a colorless liquid, in a small glass pendant, on a long gold chain. My grandfather explained that that speck, about the size of a head of a pin, was a mustard seed. I don't remember exactly what else he said, but I got the intended message: that with only a little bit of faith a person could do great things; and being a child was no excuse for not dreaming big. This was the perfect gift for me in that very pious phase of my life, and I wore that necklace to church every Sunday for a long time.

There's a great deal about the life of Jesus that has drawn me to be a follower: his compassion and inclusion, his love for people on the margins, his power to heal and his ministry of justice. These are the things that we talk about in this Circle all the time. But I also love that Jesus was a poet and a storyteller.

I used to be in a writers group when I lived in Washington, DC, with Sojourners Community. Maybe I've never joined another one because my responses became a bit of a joke. All the others in the group were poets, and they spent a lot of time critiquing one another's meter and rhyme and style. All I could ever think to sputter out was "nice imagery."

I think if I encountered Jesus on the street, I'd probably sputter out the same thing. Jesus was a master of imagery. He knew his audience. He was addressing largely rural, agrarian folk, who lived under occupation by imperial Rome. They were exploited for their labor and hated for their faith. Jesus told parables using everyday images that were very familiar to his hearers—about farming, labor, and keeping house; about fair wages and decent treatment.

Our scripture passage tonight includes five parables. They are, more accurately, similes: "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Fill in the blank.

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Partners—the pacifist and interracial community that was birthed in Georgia in 1942—liked to call them Comparisons. A Southern Baptist theologian, Jordan wrote the Cottonpatch version of the Gospels and Epistles. Like Jesus, he was committed to using imagery that was easily graspable to his audience. So he took Jesus out of his historical context and set him down on Georgia's red clay. In his Cottonpatch version, Jesus was born in Gainesville and placed in an apple crate; confronted the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta; and died by lynching.

Jordan wrote, "A parable is something you use when the situation is very dangerous. You hide your truth in it; it's a literary Trojan horse." He went on to remind his readers of the story of the ancient men of Greece, who built a huge wooden horse and hid some of their soldiers in it. Their enemies saw it and said, according to Jordan: "Well, that's a fine old horse. Maybe we could take him into town and build a big merry-go-round to go with him." So they opened the gates and pulled the horse into Troy, "and let school out so the children could see him." You know the end of the story: in the middle of the night, the hidden soldiers sprang out and conquered the city.

Jordan continued, "Now Jesus used that kind of a Trojan-horse technique under certain circumstances. He used it when the situation was dangerous, and when his hearers were difficult. When they would just stop up their ears and shut their eyes, and they wouldn't hear and they wouldn't see, Jesus would bring out a Trojan horse." A parable.

Clarence Jordan's term for the "kingdom of heaven" is the God Movement, which I like. Many attempts have been made through the years to "inclusivize" the biblical phrase: using the "realm of God" or "reign of God." I've recently heard the term "commonwealth of God" used, and I'm particularly fond of it. It's inclusive; it's a term of governance like "kingdom," retaining the political quality of Jesus' message; and it speaks to the countercultural nature of the life into which his followers are called.

The way of empire then—as now—is to concentrate wealth, with a strong military to protect that wealth and subdue those who want their fair share of it. We only have to listen to the current wrangling over the debt ceiling—if you can bear it—to know that powerful forces are invested in safeguarding the greed of those with the most money. "Commonwealth" implies sharing the wealth for the common good, with equal access for all.

So the Commonwealth of God is like a mustard seed. In that tiny speck is hidden a huge tree, one that is large enough to hold nesting birds. This same imagery can be found in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel and the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Daniel. These Old Testament books were written during a time of exile for our

ancestors in the faith. Jerusalem, their holy capital, had been destroyed, and they were suffering under Babylonian captivity. The image of birds nesting again in the trees was a sign of promise, hope, and restoration. Jesus' hearers suffering under Roman rule would have understood that hidden message.

The Commonwealth of God is also like yeast that a woman mixes in with three measures of flour to leaven the whole batch—about a hundred loaves of bread, according to the footnote in my Bible. I appreciate that Jesus used images that spoke to women as well as men.

On Monday night I watched a documentary about the Freedom Rides of the civil rights era with folks from *Defensa Comunitaria*, the local Latino advocacy group. This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that amazing witness aimed at desegregating public transportation in the South. I was stunned all over again by the brutality of the movement's enemies—and the courage of those who faced a fire-bombed bus in Anniston, Alabama, and beatings in Jackson, Mississippi.

A lot of people tried to dissuade the Freedom Riders from what many saw as a suicidal mission. I didn't realize until Monday night that among them was Martin Luther King. But not only did the original riders continue, many more people—most of them young—formed groups and joined the movement, initiating Freedom Rides in other cities. Instead of being scared away by the hard labor in chain gangs to which arrested riders were subjected in Mississippi, they determined to fill the jail. They believed that this was indeed a God Movement.

One observer made the comment that the Freedom Riders were the yeast that sparked the movement. This little bit of leavening—about a dozen people at the start—caused an uprising; just as a little bit of yeast can cause a hundred loaves of bread to rise up. Half a century later, people here are still looking to them, to draw inspiration for the possibility of a sort of Freedom Ride Movement related to recent laws that have criminalized transporting undocumented folks.

The Commonwealth of God is like treasure hidden in a field. When someone finds it, he reburies it, and goes and sells all that he has in order to buy the field. I'm grateful to Brian Graves for sharing with me a paper he wrote on this passage in seminary. He defines *treasure* as "that which one most values, for which one will give or sell anything to have or acquire, and which thoroughly and inevitably marks one's life and actions."

The theme of treasure appears in the next parable as well: The Commonwealth of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he finds one of great value, he sells everything to buy it. I like Clarence Jordan's version of this one: "The God Movement is like a jeweler looking for special pearls. When he finds a super-duper one, he goes and unloads his whole stock and buys that pearl."

### **Following Jesus will require letting go of anything that distracts us from the pursuit of true faith.**

The message is that following Jesus will require letting go of anything that distracts us from the pursuit of true faith. For the Freedom Riders, this meant letting go of fear, and safety, and, for many, the pursuit of education. I think it was John Lewis, then a seminary student in Nashville and now a member of the U.S. Congress, who talked about the challenge of that last one. Many of the Freedom Riders were the first members of their families to attend college, and their parents had made great sacrifices in order for them to get an education. Jeopardizing that education in order to participate in the civil rights struggle was no small thing. Neither, of course, was the fact that the riders were literally risking their lives.

The Commonwealth of God is like a net thrown into the sea, and when it is full it is hauled to shore, where the "good" and the "bad" are separated. Clarence Jordan uses the terms the "just" and the "unjust."

I couldn't read this one without remembering a day when I helped a friend haul his lobster traps off of Block Island, Rhode Island. We were lucky to find a lobster among all the stuff that got in the traps: all manner of skates, sea urchins, eels, and other weird and slimy fish I had no name for—which we threw back into the ocean.

I always find it uncomfortable to encounter imagery about separating the “good” and the “bad,” especially when the bad get thrown into a burning furnace. I tend to think we’ve all got enough good and bad mixed up in us that the task is more complicated than it seems at first glance. And I’ve never been particularly drawn to the idea of a fiery-furnace hell. That’s in part because that image has been so misused as a scare tactic to try to “win souls” for Christ. It’s also the case that only Matthew among the Gospel writers uses this precise image of God’s judgment.

In any event, Jesus ends his string of short parables with this image of the evil being separated from the righteous and sent to a fiery place where people are weeping and gnashing their teeth in anguish. And then Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?”

The next sentence is just three words: “They answered, ‘Yes.’”

I don’t know about you, but I can’t help picturing them nodding their heads and exchanging glances and saying, “Oh yeah. We get it. Yeah. Totally.” The disciples proceed to act in ways that seem to indicate otherwise.

Jesus’ last words in this passage are: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the Commonwealth of God is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

The “old” and “new” refer to the ancient witness of scripture and Jesus’ fulfillment of promises made there. I’m most captured by the phrase “trained for the Commonwealth of God.” It’s not something you just leap into.

The Freedom Rides documentary showed the rigorous training in nonviolent response that the riders undertook before they got on the bus. They did role plays in which people harassed and threatened and punished them for their witness. Over and over they did this, until the natural response to fight back was overcome by the discipline of nonviolence.

***Disciple and discipline  
share the same root.***

*Disciple and discipline* share the same root. The desire to abandon all else for the God Movement, as the men in the parables did for the treasure and the pearl, soon loses steam if there’s not some discipline involved: prayer, scripture, reading the signs of the times, making public witness, building community with sisters and brothers in the faith.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about Will being in Nicaragua with Witness for Peace. When I went there 28 years ago, a war was raging. Preparing for that trip was one of only a handful of times in all my years that I’ve had to ask myself if I’m willing to risk my life for what I believe. Even then, I knew the odds were in my favor. Same thing a few years later in apartheid-era South Africa. Being a North American in white skin with financial resources affords a certain amount of protection in dangerous places.

I’ve been very grieved and angered about the deepening polarization and lack of civility and compromise in our country in this era. I’ve recently had the image of a noose tightening around it, squeezing the life out of us, beginning with the most vulnerable ones. I think we’re entering a time of hardship that has been unprecedented in the lifetime of most of us.

Where do we stand in such a time? What does our faith require of us? What are we willing to risk? And with whom will we risk it? There is much to discern in the days ahead. This much we know is true: The parables of Jesus invite us to pursue the Commonwealth of God, in all its grandeur and mystery, single-mindedly and whole-heartedly.

Amen.