

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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He put before them 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."

First of all, these parables, including the parable of the net, are fun! They are parables of delight. The parable of the net is the only emotionally ambiguous story in the series. But I remember sorting shrimp from the jelly fish and other junk that came up from the floor of Currituck bay in North Carolina on a shrimp boat. And it was fun. It is even more fun when it is a metaphor for the celebration of long awaited justice for the righteous and punishment for the wicked in world history. This is then the spirit of these parables. They are parables of joy and celebration of the mysteries of the kingdom of God in the world.

The first two parables contrast small and large. The mustard seed and the yeast may be small but they have a major impact. The contrast is between the little bit of the seed and the yeast and the sheer size of their effect. The next two episodes are parables of treasure.

Someone discovers a treasure of great value and invests everything to buy that one thing of great value.

The last parable is the parable of the net followed by its interpretation in relation to the kingdom of God at the end of the age. The metaphor is a fisherman's metaphor that refers to the everyday experiences of fishermen who worked on and around the Sea of Galilee. The interpretation relates this everyday experience to the sorting that will take place at the final coming of the Kingdom of God.

The concluding episode is the saying about the scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven. Most commentators think that this is a self-description of Matthew and that he is describing the role of those who have been trained as scribes for the kingdom of heaven. The job of the scribe/scholar is to bring out of his knowledge chest the jewels of the tradition and the new insights of the present. There is the possibility that Matthew here is contrasting scribes like himself who have been trained to interpret the law in relation to the Kingdom of God and the other scribes of the Jewish community whose training was focused on the maintenance of the law as a set of boundaries between righteous Jews and corrupt Gentiles. Whether or not this is autobiographical, this is a time of intimacy and of self-confession by the storyteller: this is who I am.

The dynamics of this are the delight of the first parables and the contrast between smallness and **greatness**, expressed in volume, gestures and overall attitude. These are times to smile. Likewise the parables of the treasure and the great pearl are stories of great fascination. Variations of the story of the treasure or of the great pearl are present in many cultures. John Steinbeck's story of a pearl turns the hope of a magnificent pearl into a tragedy. And Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man in the Sea* is another story of the fulfillment of the dream of a lifetime into a kind of tragedy. Jesus' parables are unambiguously optimistic and celebrative. These are parables of the good news of the Kingdom of God.

The parable of the net is also a parable of everyday experience for fishermen. As mentioned above, I once went on a shrimp trawler. The trawler drags the bottom of the bay and picks up everything. We hauled in all of this stuff including cans and bottles and other things. The basket dumped it all in a sorting bin and we threw out all of the jellyfish and other junk fish as well as the real junk but in the midst of it were a lot of great shrimp. This is the metaphor for the sorting that will happen at the end of the age. The overall spirit of this is not to worry about the good and the bad but to leave that for the end of the age and God will take care of the sorting of the good and evil.

People make a range of connections with these parables. In telling them, the most important thing to do is to make them inviting. Make them into metaphors that will stick in your listeners' imagination.