

Right Between The Eyes

Sometimes when Jesus really gets going, he reminds me of the old Rocky movies, with jabs and upper cuts and roundhouse punches so fast you don't see them coming.

Today's gospel is one of those.

Right out of the chute, Jesus starts it coming fast and furious.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that's practically invisible until it grows into a tree....

he says....,

without giving us a chance to catch our breath and say hey!,

but mustard is a weed that nobody likes,

it gets planted not on purpose but through oversight,

because you can't see the danged thing hidden in with what we planned to plant,

and besides, it's not a tree, it's an ugly oversized bush!

Nope, Jesus gives us time for none of that,

because now he's on a new track with a different angle on the kingdom of God:

this time he's talking yeast,

except he's not talking Fleishmanns in the nice yellow Safeway packet,

he's talking leaven,

which, as you who love San Francisco know,

is nothing more than a small piece of old dough stuck in a dark hole until it gets really moldy and is then tucked in to new flour to make new bread.....

it's said every loaf of San Fran's famous sourdough has a piece of the original — made over 100 years ago.....

(which is a little disgusting when you think about it....)

and not only that, the gal Jesus has making bread does it with three measures of flour,

which,

at first glance,

seems to finally get us back to normal for a moment,

until we realize that three measures are not three cups of flour,

three measures is 50 pounds of flour!

enough, with that rotten leaven hidden inside, to grow so large that her whole village will have plenty to eat;

yet for the Jewish people, the folks making up Jesus' audience, leaven is corrupt, unclean, filthy....

which is a heck of a thing to compare the Kingdom of God to, which, if he gave us a moment, we would mention to him,

except, he's off to the races again.

Now he's talking about the kingdom as a fella who's found loot on someone else's land, hides the loot, buys the land and lives happily ever after....

but wait a sec Jesus, why's that trespasser messing around on private property that isn't his,

and, while we're at it, how dare he take something from land he doesn't own, hide it,

then bamboozle the owner by failing to disclose all material facts of the transaction?????

We are a law abiding people, aren't we Jesus????

But he's got no time for our objection, because now he's comparing God's kingdom to a pearl among pearls,

so that the used pearl salesman sells everything she has to have it,

but before we can mutter a word about common sense and balanced portfolios and not putting all your eggs in one basket,

he's off to that great fish haul where the dragnet brings up rusty cans and sweet ahi and clams and tires and weeds and rocks and lobster and you name it,

all of it getting dragged to the shore —

and this great dragnet that hauls in the whole world, and everything living in it, well,

this too is what the kingdom of God is like;

except, if only he'd give us a moment,

we would point out that this looks an awful lot like God seeking us out rather than us seeking out God,

and while we're at it, doesn't God have more discriminating taste than to haul in every last one of us????!

Phew!

So there we have it.

What is the kingdom of God like?

Why, it's like a weed or moldy dough, it's like a thief or a used car salesman, it's like everything a net can drag in from the sea.

If you want to say it in the language of 2014, if you want to feel the same kind of wallop to the chin those first listeners felt, well then maybe you'd say:

"The kingdom of God is like a virus in a dirty needle that a junkie took and injected into a vein so the whole body was infected." Laurel Dykstra.

Or as a woman dying of breast cancer put it:

"The kingdom of God is like cancer that invaded a woman's breast until it had consumed all of her, even in her Sunday finery." Scott, Reimagine The World, 34.

Nasty stuff to our ears, but no nastier than comparing the kingdom to weeds or mold or a dragnet to the ears of first century Jews.

Last week my wife sent me a video about humanists.

The video said humanists don't believe in life after death; and it went on to talk about life after death consisting of a disembodied soul going off to a cloudy place to play a harp all day long.

I laughed, because our faith doesn't believe such a thing either, although in the popular imagination, that's exactly what a whole lot of folks seem to believe.

Jesus tells his odd parables, his offensive parables, comparing weeds and mold and thieves and unsavory characters and drug addicts and cancer to the Kingdom of God perhaps to shake us up enough to realize that our own sentimental fantasies about the who and what and wherefores of God are often completely off the mark.

That the point of a Christian life is not to keep our nose clean so we can play a harp for forever, but that the point of the Christian life is to become workers in God's kingdom TODAY, on earth as in heaven, where the fields are ripe for harvest, but please God, send more laborers!

All through these parables, Jesus keeps insisting that we LISTEN!

And yet:

"Listening to Jesus is hard because you run the risk of having to change the way you see the world.

It seems we would sooner kill him than listen to him." Zia Rahman. (modified).

And kill him we did, but thankfully, God refuses to take our NO for an answer.

In these parables, perhaps Jesus is telling us that God really does love, desire, want, the whole wide world, and every Tom, Dick and Harriet who ever lived in it.

In these parables, perhaps Jesus is telling us that while soaring Cathedrals and magnificent cedar trees are all well and good, the place God most readily makes her home is here, among the regular folks, especially the most needy, the least cared for, the ugly and the poor; and since that is where God makes God's home, the church, the visible sign of God in the world, well, maybe that's where we need to make our home too.

Just as the thief bought the whole entire field, and not just the small piece where he buried the treasure, so too the church "if it can't bring itself to buy all sorts and

conditions of human beings — white and nonwhite, male and female, smart and stupid, good and bad, spiritual and nonspiritual — if we can't do that, why, we can't even begin to pretend" to be God's visible sign on earth. R. Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 116. (modified).

My hope for you, my hope for me, is that we all of us stagger out of here today, perhaps a bit bruised, perhaps a bit shaken up, by the stunning news that what we so often hold in contempt turns out to be the very apple of God's eye.

And if you can see that truth, hidden in the most ordinary people, places and things, then "you are now trained for the kingdom of heaven, and you, like the master, can bring out of your treasure what is new and what is old."

+amen