

February 17, 2019
You Don't Know Heads from Tails
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Matthew 13:24-43

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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."

³³ 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." ³⁴ Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Jesus speaks of good seed and bad, sown together in a field by cosmic enemies. Jesus will preach this same lesson in half a dozen more parables – the point every time being that his followers don't know heads from tails between judgment and redemption, so we'd best lay off pretending we do. Faithfulness itself – if not our eternal destiny! – depends on it, or so the parables go.

But why? ask the children of the Son – in every generation since. Why do you watch and do nothing? Why didn't you stop it – the evil – before it took such root, got such a hold on what would have grown up good? or, Let us go do it!

That's Jesus for you, though. Never answering the questions we DO ask, but rather the ones we don't. We want to know why God is the way God is, and he tells us how to live. We'd settle just to *know* something, and God pitches the chance to have a happy life. Here. Now. In this field of wheat and weeds, where the beautiful and disgraceful are all tangled up together. In our hearts and histories. Our own households even.

Let's pray: *Great is the temptation, O God, to spend our spiritual energy picking ourselves apart in judgment. Picking others apart with those same tweezers. Create in us, we pray, the hunger to be happy, the courage to trust you. Amen.*

Matthew says Jesus said nothing without saying so in parables, *to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah* – a very Bible-y sounding reason. But I wonder, are people worried about that? About what Isaiah prophesied? I wonder if Jesus' reason wasn't a bit more practical than that? If he spoke in parables because, well, because the God of the universe doesn't really have any other way of talking to human beings.

Seems to me that God trying to explain the kingdom of God to a human being would be like Albert Einstein explaining quantum theory to a Golden Retriever. God is absolutely going to have to use a tennis ball, or she'll never get the hang of it. The parables are the tennis ball – simple human things we already know that God uses to help us try to grasp the enormous spiritual ones we don't.



How can we possibly imagine being set free, not merely from death itself someday, but from the fear of death every day? In chapter 13, Jesus selects three ordinary household spaces containing three ordinary objects: seeds, plants, and bread. Real things people already know, to tell them something about the kingdom of God.

All three require similar treatment for them to do what they do:

- ❖ we must leave them alone;
- ❖ we must stay out of the way;
- ❖ we must be patient.

In a word, we must do NOTHING. I don't know the science of a seed, but I know that if I put certain seeds in the dirt in May and keep the chickens out of the garden in June, I'll have flowers in July and tomatoes in August. I don't know the science of gluten, but I feel like a magician every single time I mix sugar, yeast, and warm water in a bowl and smell it activate. When my kids were little and I fed them bread I'd made myself, I felt like a really, really good mother.

So when Jesus says the kingdom of God in this world works like seeds in the ground and yeast in the bread I can begin to imagine what that means – that God is working in ways

my eyes cannot see to bring enormous change, using tiny little things like art, like ministry, like the church, like strangers, like you, like me.

I can imagine the kingdom of God as a kitchen table surrounded by healthy kids laid with bread and butter and jam and cheese by parents who feel rich and safe and never afraid for their children.

We are the kind of people who take a certain confidence in being smart, in believing it's possible to be competent – experts, even. And it's possible that we do that with faith too: that is, *imagine being competent at faith to understand God*. As if understanding God will change us in ways that make life better.

What if we come here reaching for some religious understanding of reality while God is here wanting to convince us that we are loved, that we are safe? Are we really too smart, too competent, to admit that we want to be loved? What if the whole truth of what God has done for us is, in fact, just too big and too mysterious for minds as small, for hearts as frail and fearful as ours?

What I know for sure is that the religious spaces I have ever been in which were deeply invested in judgment and redemption – specifically, who is in and who is out – are not the same spaces that made a convincing case for the unconditional, overwhelming love of God. That said, this text has a hitch: Jesus' hellfire rant beginning in verse 41. I could do without it, honestly. Maybe his explanation of the parable is also a parable, seeds refer to children, children refer to something else? *Blessings and curses*, maybe. *The causes of sin* (as in verse 41).

Push parables to logic and they all fall apart. I can't make heads or tails of these two verses, except where Jesus says again, it'll be angels who sort it out. Not the slaves. Not the workers. Not you. Not us, since God knows we can't. Not among ourselves, nor inside our own hearts. *Leave it alone*, remember? *Stay out of the way*. *Be patient*.

Jesus says, *the kingdom of God is among you*. And the most we may ever grasp of that is that he loves us and wants us to be happy – here, now, wheat and weeds all tangled up together. Believing as best we can that God is busy in this world in ways we cannot see – except for when we can, like when seeds become tomatoes. And we find ourselves both braver and more humble, joyful and more generous, rich in everything that matters.

Would you pray with me?