

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Matthew 13:31-3, 44-52

## Gospel Eyes

When I was growing up, I spent a good portion of most summers and Christmas breaks with my grandparents on their farm in West Texas. The farm was part of the land my Great Granddaddy Shive secured under the Homestead Act of 1862.

Under the Homestead Act, anybody could acquire as much as a section of land (640 acres) without paying a dime for it. All you had to do was live on the land and cultivate it – plant some crops, put up some fences, build a house. My Great Granddaddy did all of that. When he died, the land was passed to his children, one of which turned out to be my Grandmother, Opal Alenia Shive Loveless.

A fellow trying to coax a living out that red, sandy soil of West Texas had to face all sorts of obstacles. Two feature in my childhood memory.

First, there's the weather, which can turn on you just as your cotton crop has become established, pummeling the young plants with hailstones the size of golf balls. Then there are the tornadoes, of which I saw several in my tender years. Nothing stays with a ten-year-old quite so permanently as the sight of twin funnel clouds headed in your direction.

The second challenge for my Granddaddy was Johnson grass – a weed that is native to the Mediterranean region, but managed to cross the Atlantic and spread across most of the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It's called Johnson grass after an Alabama plantation owner, Colonel William Johnson, who sowed its seeds on river-bottom land, round the year 1840, thinking it would make good forage for his cattle.

The problem is, when Johnson grass starts to wilt, it produces hydrogen cyanide, which can kill cattle if they eat too much of the stuff. Horses, too.

I suppose Colonel Johnson thought he had a good idea at the time – a bit like the folks who thought it was a good idea to plant a certain vine on farms in the South as a hedge against erosion. The vine came from Japan and it's called Kudzu.

Not such good ideas after all.

My Granddaddy hated Johnson grass. It came up in his cotton fields. It clogged his fence rows. It sprouted amongst the squash and watermelon vines in my grandmother's garden. It poisoned his livestock. Johnson grass was a threat to all things orderly and predictable. If you wanted to get my Granddaddy riled up, all you had to say was "Johnson grass."

Only recently have I learned that the mustard plant was the ancient Middle Eastern equivalent of Johnson grass. If you wanted to get a farmer back in Jesus' day riled up, all you had to say was "mustard bushes."

I grew up thinking of the mustard plant as something good – even holy. After all, it's in the Bible. It turns out that contemporaries of Jesus would have thought of it as a noxious weed – something to be pulled up by the roots and thrown onto the fire.

We just heard several short parables of Jesus, all of which compare the kingdom of heaven to simple, familiar things that any of his first hearers would have known about.

- The kingdom of heaven is like yeast which a woman mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. (By the way, 3 measures of flour would make enough bread to feed a three-day wedding feast).
- The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found and hid. Then in his joy he goes and sells what he has and buys that field.
- The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who searches for fine pearls. He finds a single pearl of great value, sells everything he has, and buys it.

- The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It's the smallest of seeds, but grows into the greatest of shrubs -- so big the birds of the air can nest in its branches.

All of these images sound quaint and picturesque to the likes of you and me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but to Jesus' audience they would have elicited a collective "*Huh? You're comparing the kingdom of heaven to what?*"

You see, leaven or yeast was not considered a good thing back then. It was associated with rot and decay. Contemporaries of Jesus thought of leaven as the agent that causes corpses to bloat and rot. Sure, a woman needed a little of it to make the bread rise, but if she used too much, that bread could kill you. As Passover neared, every smidgen of leaven had to be removed from the house.

And, think about it: What do you call someone who digs up treasures in a field that doesn't belong to him, and then hides what he finds? Then he goes and sells everything he has and *buys that field*.

Wouldn't you call that someone a thief? (I certainly wouldn't call him a Boy Scout, but then again, the Boy Scouts have been keeping rather questionable company lately.)

And did you know that in Jesus' day, merchants of all kinds were considered greedy, sneaky, and unscrupulous? A merchant who bought and sold pearls would have been the modern equivalent of a used car salesman, or perhaps one of those internet trolls who sends you e-mails claiming to be a Nigerian prince.

Knowing all this, one is tempted to say, *Come off it, Jesus. Do you really mean to compare the reign of the Holy One, the kingdom of heaven, to this string of unsavory similes?*

- Leaven.
- A guy who digs up treasure that doesn't belong to him.
- A sleazy merchant.
- The seed of an unwanted shrub.

*(And, while we're at it, Jesus, who in his right mind intentionally plants a weed in his field? Call me Colonel William Johnson, but that doesn't make any sense.)*

Maybe – just maybe – that's the whole point of these short parables. Maybe Jesus isn't trying to paint some exalted picture God's reign, but instead is bringing God's reign literally down to earth.

Jesus is himself God's Word made flesh, the divine presence in an ordinary, earthy body. His entire ministry is incarnational. According to Matthew's Gospel, the first words out of Jesus' mouth as he emerges from the wilderness are **“the kingdom of heaven has come near”** (3:2).

Near – close enough to touch and taste – but also hidden from plain sight. Like a treasure buried in a field or a precious pearl in a bag full of ordinary pearls.

Hidden, too, in plain sight. We could be looking straight at the signs of God's presence, and not even notice. That's why we need new ears to hear and new eyes to see. Gospel ears and Gospel eyes to behold the kingdom hidden in the Johnson grass.

“For Jesus, God's realm is not some esoteric kingdom in the sweet by and by, but as close as the next mustard bush or loaf of bread . . . [These parables] envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading dough to plowing fields. Jesus transforms human life not by scaring the hell out of people, but by helping them see the heaven close at hand.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometime back in the early 1980's, public television aired an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. At that time, apartheid had an iron grip on South Africa, and there was no outward sign that it would end anytime soon. Archbishop Tutu smiled in that way he had – that way that said, “Listen, I'm telling you more than you might be hearing.” He said,

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<sup>1</sup> Talitha J. Arnold, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 288

When white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, "Let us pray." When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal.

The kingdom of heaven invades the carefully cultivated land of our unquestioned assumptions and unexamined certainties. It creates out of nothing something new – something that is hiding in plain sight. It is subversive and at the same time it is exciting, because once we see its signs, we cannot go back. We cannot pretend that we haven't caught a glimpse of God in the process of making all things new. We have "the better of the deal."

In these times, a lot of people in our nation -- many of them Christians -- are upset about the signs they see. They see our nation becoming less Euro-centric and more multi-cultural, less white and more red, yellow, black, and all the shades in between. They see less exclusion and more inclusion. They see people of the same sexual orientation taking vows of covenant love, and they see their own grandchildren playing with kids who, back in the "good old days" would have had to knock on the back door, never the front.

They see all of this, and they think, "Johnson grass! Mustard bushes! Nothing good is going to come from this." A lot of them prefer to vote for candidates who promise to turn back the clock.

Through these parables, Jesus is telling us, "Look again! See what God is unearthing. You just might be looking at the kingdom of heaven."

Get used to it, beloved. Better still, Rejoice in it. Because Jesus is here, and the kingdom is at hand.