

So, you just heard a series of five parables, which we know to be shared by Jesus with his disciples.

Truth be told, I have a love/hate relationship with parables.

I find them overwhelming, especially when they are written in a row the way Matthew presents them.

Am I supposed to be able to synthesize them and extract one cohesive meaning from these little vignettes?

I haven't been able to do that.

So do they have many different meanings?

Probably, but that's a bit much, I can only go really deep with one or two at a time.

And the thing is, that I feel like I am supposed to understand these parables because Jesus' disciples did!

In the last verse, after telling them all these parables, Jesus asks his disciples, "*Have you understood all this?*" They answered, 'Yes.' (Mat. 13: 51).

I don't want to call the writer of the Gospel of Matthew a liar, but I don't believe it.

Either the writer is lying or the disciples are, because there is just too much going on here to comprehensively understand it all.

And then, after they say ‘yep, we understand it all,’ Jesus says great, here’s one more, *‘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.’* (Mat. 13: 52).

I imagine they told him that they understood that too.

Perfect. No explanation needed from Jesus.

Well, maybe I am simpler than the disciples because I need a little help dissecting all these parables.

Commentators point out that the first two parables, the ones about the mustard seed and the leaven in the bread, are addressed to the crowds and they speak of the actions of God.

“God is at work in people, events, situations (mustard seeds) we regard as insignificant and God's actions have results wildly beyond our expectations.

God is at work in people, events, situations (leaven) widely regarded as subversive of the status quo and counter to standards of worldly success.” (McKenzie, Alyce M. *“Strange Scripture: Reflections on the Five Parables in Matthew 13.”* www.patheos.com.)

Okay, I can wrap my head around this idea.

It feels to me like what these parables are trying to communicate to us is that faith isn’t an intellectual idea but an experience.

It’s an experience of the creative and redemptive power of God that continues to change lives and the world as a whole.

And God works in really unexpected ways, like through an irritating and invasive, seemingly useless weed such as the mustard seed.

God also works in hidden and mysterious ways like the leaven in flour.

The text says the woman had 3 measures of flour.

That's a lot of flour, enough flour to make enough bread to feed over 100 people!

So she takes leaven, (which, in those days was a rotting, molding lump of bread, it was not the yeast that comes in tidy packets today), and there's enough of it to make 3 measures of flour rise.

That's a miracle.

But that's how God works, in unexpected, maybe even sometimes unpleasant ways.

And here's the thing that I like about these two parables, the mustard seed and the leaven, which is that, you know when you are having an experience of the divine.

As I said before, it's not intellectual, it's embodied, you know it in your core.

God's work in this world might be unexpected and is certainly subversive but it's also unmistakable.

To see a shrub such as the mustard plant grow to become a tree in which the birds of the air nest, that would be an undeniable miracle.

And to see some yeast leaven these giant batches of flour.

Also undeniable.

You might not be able to explain how it's happening, you just know *that* it's happening.

That's having an experience of the divine, and not to throw some more parables into the mix, lest I confuse things too much, but that's finding the pearl, the hidden treasure in a field.

You don't know how it got there, you can't explain it, but you know when you've experienced God at work in our world.

Just like the person who found the treasure could hold it and name it,

just like the merchant who found the most valuable pearl could identify it,

there are sacred moments in our lives in which we are able to name, without a doubt, that we felt the presence of God, or had an experience that was the result of something at work which is greater than any of us.

I think that for most of us, these moments are rare, they are fleeting, they are precious, like the hidden treasure, like the leaven hidden in the flour, like the elusive, perfect pearl.

But we carry these experiences with us throughout our lives, they're like priceless treasures that give us faith, that we can turn to and remember when our faith is being tested.

I had one of these experiences recently.

It happened while I was in Germany.

I was at a conference called the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and it was held in Leipzig, Germany.

This is the fifth-largest Christian communion in the world.

The ones that are larger are Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches or WCRC represents over 80 million people.

So who, exactly comprises the WCRC?

Well, it's made up of many different Christian denominations, the largest ones are the Presbyterian Church of Africa, Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, Presbyterian Church of East Africa, United Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in Hungary, Reformed Church in Romania, Protestant Church in Indonesia, and the Church of Scotland.

With only about a million members, the United Church of Christ is not one of the larger denominations in the WCRC, but we're still a very active denomination within the communion.

So this gathering in Leipzig was the very definition of an intellectual exercise.

We had all these people come together to listen to scholars, to read papers, to have theological debates, to discern proposals, to discuss them and to vote on them.

The WCRC has an Executive Council and the decisions that we made set the priorities for the Executive Council until the next global gathering.

So, while we were sitting in that giant plenary hall, inside a cold, concrete, windowless building with institutional lighting and a big stage and giant screens and round tables where all the delegates sat, I had a powerful, spiritual experience.

I didn't expect to experience this hidden spiritual treasure in this intellectual field, and yet, there it was.

I had this moment, while looking around the room, in which I realized, this, *this*, is the realm of God on earth.

The only thing we were missing were people from other religions, because we know the realm of God isn't limited to only Christians, but other than that, this, this was the global community,

manifested, the one Jesus envisioned for us, the one I believe God wishes we'd create on this one planet that we all share.

It was the realm of God on earth for several reasons.

First, the cultural diversity of the group.

One thousand people from six continents, 108 countries.

The WCRC only operates in 6 “official” languages, but there were probably dozens of languages spoken in that room.

There were men and women and genderqueer folks, there were young teenagers and older adults, there were able-bodied people and folks with differing abilities.

There were students, retired people, working adults.

There were pastors and lay people. Academics and laborers.

There were denominations like the UCC, which openly welcome and who ordain women and LGBT folks.

There were denominations that don’t ordain women and don’t believe that homosexuality exists.

There were folks who believe that Christianity is the only way to salvation and there were folks who believe all people are saved simply by their very humanity.

Words like the “global north” and “global south” were used to describe those who have traditionally had power and control and exerted it over others.

There were lots of conversations about making sure all voices were heard, that everyone had a seat at the table, that we make decisions prayerfully and faithfully.

And you know what?

We made decisions based on the consensus model so that not one person in that room of 1,000 people felt like their voice wasn't heard.

There was no simple-majority decision-making.

Decisions were made in such a way that we all had to stretch, to compromise and to agree that we are greater than the sum of our parts.

Everyone might not have loved every decision that was made, but we could all live with every decision that was made.

And sometimes, that's what it looks like to be the body of Christ.

It's not about making sure that someone wins, but about making sure that nobody loses.

In that moment, while scanning the room, I felt this sense of hope well up inside me.

I had been following our national politics from across the pond, and becoming more and more despondent.

But there, in that place, I was reminded that we will be okay.

The world might go through hell first, but we are going to be okay.

If a group this diverse can make decisions about the ordination of women and climate change and stand up against police brutality in the United States and speak out against human trafficking and work towards unifying the Koreas,

all through using consensus-based decision-making, then it gives me hope for the future of our world.

I never would have expected to have such a profound religious experience in that plenary hall, which felt anything other than sacred.

And yet, like the pearl or the treasure or the leaven in the loaf, God works in mysterious, unexpected and subversive ways.

If you are like me, and you don't fully understand these parables the ways the disciples supposedly did, that's okay.

All you need to do is to be open enough to experience God at work in our world and be aware enough to name those fleeting experiences, when you have them.

For those sacred moments, those are what will carry you through everything in between.

Amen.