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The Kingdom of Heaven is like....
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Earlier this week my online news feed offered me an article by Russell T Moore that appeared in The Atlantic Magazine. My news feed is clever, and constantly suggests articles related to my peculiar and varied interests, ranging from trends in the American religious landscape to to the latest soccer news. This article is entitled “The American Evangelical Church is in Crisis. There is Only One Way Out.”

Russell Moore who was previously the head of the Southern Baptist Conference public policy wing. says this about himself: “I am a conservative Evangelical. For years I dealt with evangelical backlash over my opposition to Donald Trump and my concern for racial justice and Church sexual abuse. ... I felt like an outcast and a heretic. *I felt homeless.* And two years ago I left the Southern Baptist world I loved.”

Moore begins by pointing out that young committed Christians are put off by culture-war politics and internet conspiracy theories. Many have stopped calling themselves Evangelicals altogether, so much has the label been confused with a political category.

He continues, “I know that many struggle, finding themselves in congregations divided by the turmoil of the political moment. The Church needs revival, but the language of revival has become cynical and associated with some of the worst aspects of American evangelicalism. He says, “Some evangelical Christians have confused revival with a return to a mythical golden age. As a Church leader once said, ‘The goal of the religious right should be 1950’s America. ... just without sexism and racism.’”

Moore continues on the theme of crisis: “Crisis shakes up the old order — ripping apart, as the Apostle Paul put it, what’s made of ‘wood, hay, stubble’. (I Cor 3:12). Now every moment is a possible apocalypse, in which what’s been around us all the while is revealed. And thus every moment is an hour of decision.”

Reading these words stopped me short. Here I recognized the link between Moore’s thoughts and the commentaries on today’s Gospel that I had been reading. I am going to return to the conclusion of his article later, but I invite you to hold on to Moore’s thoughts about crisis: “Now every moment is a possible apocalypse, in which what’s been around us all the while is revealed. And thus every moment is an hour of decision.”

We have been listening, these past three weeks, to a series of parables from the 13th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

Parables are, at the most basic level, stories that communicate some level of meaning beyond themselves. What do I mean? In today's reading, Jesus isn't teaching a science lesson about how yeast works, nor a horticulture class about maintaining a garden filled with wild mustard, nor a economics class on the value of pearls.

On the face of it, these are very simple stories. Two weeks ago, when we heard about the sower scattering seeds indiscriminately across all qualities of soil, with mixed results, I nodded to myself in understanding. Matthew provided an allegorical explanation, furthering the sense of comprehension. "Yes, I get that!"

Last week, the sower was busy again, planting wheat in his field, but *another* sower — an enemy — was up to mischief, scattering weed-seeds amongst the wheat. This story appeared more complex, presenting a dilemma and demanding a decision. But again, Matthew offered an allegorical explanation, and again the meaning seems clear.

Today there are five more parables. These are different from the earlier ones, each one as short as a single sentence. Four of them, one after another, begin with "The Kingdom of heaven is like...", followed by a simile. The Kingdom of heaven is like mustard seed that someone sowed in their field; The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that the baker mixes in her flour; the Kingdom of heaven is like the treasure found in a field; like a merchant in search of the finest pearl, and finally, like the scribe trained in the Kingdom of heaven, who brings forth from their treasury that which is new and that which is old.

At the end, he asks the listeners if they understood, and they responded "Yes!" Did they? ... Do we? Really?

Scripture scholar James McCracken, writing about this text, observes that on careful reading of Matthew Chapter 13, there is a theme of preaching against some resistance. In fact, this segment of the Gospel culminates in the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth. I have to wonder why. Don't you? It is interesting that the story tells us that the crowds commented that he was the son of "the carpenter" and Mary. After all, they know his sisters and brothers. So they wondered where his wisdom came from. We are told, "And they took offense at him."

It is McCracken's view that parables, even in their simplicity, contain a challenge. Because they are parables, and their meaning is found beyond the immediate boundaries of the stories, those meanings emerge, to one degree or another, from within each hearer. He writes:

Parables do not 'contain' knowledge; they cannot be understood as we understand a moral tale, and argument, or a statement. Parables precipitate internal action, forcing the hearer or reader to a crisis or collision that requires movement, which in New Testament terms is an either/or: either stumbling or changing-and-becoming, either enacting a lie that we desire or being transformed.

Let me offer, from today's parables, two examples of how the parables might present for the hearer a crisis or collision requiring movement.

In the first parable, a man sows mustard seeds. There is something about this image that is at once both charming and challenging. Mustard seeds are, as Jesus said, very tiny. Also, mustard was not a domesticated crop. Mustard grew wild and it was very peculiar to refer to "sowing" mustard seeds. But they yield, when circumstances are right, a shrub, or bush that is large enough for birds to nest.

In the parable of the baker leavening flour with yeast, Jesus reflects on the mysterious power of a little yeast transforming the wheat to yield forty loaves of airy, light and delicious bread.

These are parables about the Kingdom of heaven. What are they saying about God's work within us, between us, and for us? The minuscule seed yields a bush that is not majestic. These are not the towering cedars of Lebanon! But they are enough, and in fact the right environment for the birds to make their nests. The volume of yeast the baker uses is small, just a little bit, but it is powerful, and in fact, a small amount is sufficient to expand the bread dough. Without the yeast, the result will be dense, brick-like, unpalatable, useless.

Observe the scale of these images. These parables are personal in scope. I might add that this personal scale is common to almost all of the parables that we find in the gospels. These ARE stories about power; but not the power of kings, and armies, conquest and domination. These are stories about a different kind of power, that works quietly, sometimes invisibly to accomplish its goals and bring about change.

Let me suggest that it is a constant temptation to confuse the Church with the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of heaven parables are about individuals in community; about personal and interpersonal actions and effects. They are not institutional in their focus. But the Church, for good or ill (or both) IS institutional. Institutions can sometimes lose sight of their mission — their reason for existence — in their innate drive for self-preservation and need for good order.

One problem for Christianity throughout our history was its very rise to become the culturally dominant faith, the established church, the official religion. At its beginnings, Christianity was a minor movement, counter-cultural in the correct meaning of that term, presenting a challenge to empire. The Church was without official status or sanction, and intermittently subject to persecution. But that eventually changed until the Church achieved sanctioned status, and then it reached the point of being the preferred and privileged religion. For centuries, in Europe, bishops were integrally woven into the aristocracy. In our American society, clergy enjoyed status, privilege, and amplified voice in civic affairs.

So, we can become confused. Is the institutional reality of the Church the Kingdom of heaven? Or are we called — constantly called — to reimagine the ways we can be in

community, and as a community, be a positive presence in a world that is increasingly secular and disconnected and even unfamiliar with its foundational stories and traditions.

The truth is, these are not new or novel ideas. We, as a parish, have been engaged in a long period of reflection, assessment and reassessment, and planning to continue to be a creative, life-giving and spiritually enlivening presence.

It is a terrific challenge for us. I don't need to remind anybody that change is hard. The very fact of change can make us afraid. Smaller membership numbers can make us anxious, and existential worries can distract us from our mission. So for us, when we are afraid, or feel daunted and overwhelmed, I suggest that these simple parables offer words of hope and encouragement. God *is* at work here, in us, with us; inspiring us to be instruments of his peace.

With this thought, I want to return to where we started, Russell Moore's article in *The Atlantic*. This is how he ends his message:

Churches must stop the frantic rhetoric and desperate lack of confidence that seek to hold to ... the past. Instead, those worthy of the word *evangelical* should nurture the joyous and tranquil fullness of faith that prays for something new rooted in something very old — namely a commitment to personal faith and to the authority of the Bible.

That starts not with manifestos and strategic road maps, but with small-scale decisions to reawaken the awe of the God evangelicals proclaim. We must refocus our attention to conversion rather than culture wars and actually read the Bible rather than mine it for passages to win arguments. No individual can change the “evangelical movement” alone. Change comes, first person to person, then congregation by congregation. If enough of us would embrace this sense of homelessness as our new normal — as where we should have been all along— then we can rekindle a longing for a different Kingdom to call home.

In a country exhausted by the quest to “make America great again”, perhaps what we need is to make evangelicalism born again.

And, in the end, that's not a strategy. It is a prayer.

I hear this as a message that is spot-on, And a message that is translatable, and transferable, across from one Christian tradition to another. For all of us who recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we are offered Jesus' words as a reminder to keep before us what is truly important.

May we continue, as “scribes trained in the Kingdom of heaven” to pull forth from our treasury of faith those things that are old and those things that are new.

Amen.