

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Last week, after a few tries, my family and I went to Ashland and saw the Christopher Nolan blockbuster, *The Odyssey*. For what it's worth, I loved it; I've talked to others who felt that its 3-hour runtime was excessive. Different strokes, right?

But I'm fascinated by the way people in the broader discourse have been approaching the movie, as a sort of Rorschach test for our culture. The dominant commentary on the movie has centered, not on whether it tells a good story, but whether the casting is appropriate or the translation the correct one. A certain subsection has worried about why the actors use American accents, as if it's more authentic (or more highbrow) for fictional ancient Greek warriors to speak in British tones. Of course Matt Damon and a significant portion of the cast ARE Americans, so there's that.

I don't know whether Nolan intended to make a contentious movie or not, but the heated disagreement about it has certainly kept *The Odyssey* in the news cycle. During a moment in which our collective attention spans for both foreign and domestic affairs seem to be about five minutes long, this one movie has garnered story after story for weeks. And, I have to say, I have become invested in the outcome. It seems as if the way we respond to the telling of a 3,000 year-old tale has something to say about who we are. Will we see in it what we always see? Or does it have the power to change us in some way?

As we have moved through Matthew this summer and Jesus' apparently inexhaustible rucksack of parables, I have begun to suspect a similar marketing plan. That is, rather than handing his listeners a new stack of rules to memorize, or dryly academic interpretations of the old rules, he tells them stories that often tap into that well of ancient emotions, hoping to confound and reroute our thinking.

In this community, in which gardeners seem to grow on trees, parables about good soil and wheat and weeds are perhaps relatable enough. And yet, just like tales of far off lands, they tend to serve as a blank canvas, for the feelings we already have about who is good soil (us) and who is weedy (them). We like to pare off the bits that don't seem to make sense (like the sower who keeps sowing even onto the rocky soil and the pathway) so

that, once again, we can boil the parable down to a rule. Which, if you have been paying attention, is counter to what a parable is for.

Parable, which comes from the Greek word for throwing alongside, means both a juxtaposition or comparison, and a talking-around. Jesus' parables make comparisons to everyday phenomena, like plants and fields, but they're not simple and direct. They often evade summary. And this is not an accident. When Jesus wants to say something directly, he says, "Sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor." Or "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

So when Jesus instead tells a parable, he must have a reason for doing so. And this week, he showers us with parables thick and fast.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard plant: it starts out tiny and ends up attracting birds? Most of us are probably more familiar with faith being compared to a mustard seed. That makes a kind of sense. But the kingdom of heaven? A head-scratcher.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast in flour: You don't see it, but get it wet and it has great rising power?

The kingdom of heaven is hidden in a field? But worth a lot of money?

The kingdom of heaven is a lovely pearl; maybe that's the treasure hidden in a field? The kingdom of heaven is a net catching good fish, like walleyes, and bad fish, like pike? The longer he goes on the more perplexed we grow.

So maybe we've been following along carefully as Jesus explains the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and the weeds. But now they're raining down harder and faster and seem to point in all different directions. What's more, just as the subject of Ancient Greece is like a hyperlink to other experiences, other emotional states, Jesus is dropping hyperlinks to other references, other scripture.

If his audience has been diligent in their study of scripture, they will hear "birds of the air" and think about the God who created the birds of the air, and they will hear "three measures of flour" and think about Abram

greeting the angels of the Lord with hospitality. But even if they make these connections, they probably won't be any less confused than we are. Maybe all this just seems super academic, the kind of thing only Bible nerds like me would care about. So let me say clearly what I think Jesus is trying to do here.

First, he's making a connection to spiritual life as we live it. This isn't a NEW rule, Jesus says. I'm telling you about the religion you're supposedly already practicing. I'm showing you that the kingdom of God was already present when Abraham was entertaining angels. And I'm asking you to examine the life you're living now. Is church just a place you go on Sundays (he would have said Saturdays, of course) or does it make a difference in your life?

Second, it's not really a rule at all. I'm asking you to keep in mind God's kin-dom as it's living among you right now. It may seem to be hidden—in the flour, in the field, in the sea—but it's right here, right now. Not in a place improbably paved with gold, but in the small, everyday things you encounter. Yes, you, the farmer. You, the baker. You, the fisherperson. Rich people, poor people, it's right in front of you.

Third, Jesus says, when I ask you, "Have you understood all this?" we answer "Yes." But I'm guessing we really don't. By the look on our faces, we don't get it. But that's OK. Because the kingdom of heaven isn't something you have to understand in order to experience.

The kingdom of heaven is not logical. We can't reason it out. And that's good news. If heaven operated on logic, we would all be found weedy and wanting. If heaven operated on logic, we would all be pike and thrown back in the water. However, the kingdom of heaven is not logical, because God's love and mercy is bigger than logic. So the more tangled up we get in trying to understand these parables, the more we finally have to trust Jesus, knowing that peace and love surpassing our human understanding is at work. And that really is a kingdom of heaven moment. Amen.