

## Hidden Kingdom

*Psalm 139:1-18*

*Matthew 13:31-34 and 44-48*

Let us pray:

*Holy, amazing, extraordinary God, you open your Word to us and invite us into your holy, amazing, extraordinary kingdom. Give us curiosity and courage enough to hear and see and participate in its coming. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my rock and my redeemer.*

It came to me while we were driving through the Adirondacks a week and a half ago.

Jeff and I have just returned from camping on the shores of Lake Meacham, across the water from Debar Mountain. If you haven't been there, then you should know that at over 6 million acres, the Adirondack State Park is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States. It is greater in size than Yellowstone, the Everglades, Glacier, and Grand Canyon National Parks combined. It boasts over 3,000 lakes, 30,000 miles of rivers and streams, 46 mountain peaks over 4,000 feet high. And although some of the park does contain privately held land, nearly half of it, since 1892, is constitutionally protected to remain a "forever wild" forest preserve.

It is a wild place—as pristine a wilderness as I have experienced in a long time. As you drive or hike or canoe through the park, you find yourself surrounded by vast tracts of unspoiled forest, dense stands of hardwoods and pines. It seems most certainly that there is nothing but trees, when all of a sudden, around a curve, lies a jewel-like lake, sparkling in the sun, cradled by mountain peaks.... Sometimes it seems for all the world that you are miles from any civilization, when wait a minute—through the trees—there's a house in there!

In search of the trailhead for Floodwood Mountain, we literally stumbled over a thriving canoe livery, splashing up between the lakes along the dusty road that had seemed to me to be quite unused. Kayakers and canoeists and other casual outbackers just like us emerged from the hidden streams around us, portaging their canoes to the next put in. Where did they come from? And on the mountain climb, when all we could hear were birds singing and trees sighing, we met other hikers—where did *they* come from?—melting out of the greenery and back into it just as quickly.

Canoeing across a placid lake, silently gliding through the morning, we were delighted, when without any forewarning, a gloriously feathered, red-eyed loon popped to surface of the water right next to us, to lock gaze with us in mutual frozen astonishment! Now where in the world did he come from? Even our one night to eat out surprised us—the ramshackle and rather dubious exterior of the restaurant belied the beautiful décor and excellent cuisine within.

Every sunrise, every bend in the road, every stroke of the canoe paddles, every vista from the mountains, was a joyful discovery, a new delight, an invitation to see with expectant eyes, with anticipating heart.

I realized on about day three that we were vacationing in the Hidden Kingdom.....

The Hidden Kingdom. Jesus talked about this Kingdom a great deal ... on a particular day, on a particular mountain, beside a particular lake, he throws out story after story about the Kingdom... the Kingdom of Heaven, or .... the Kingdom of God ... as Luke would say. Listen for Jesus' words for us today from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 13, reading from Today's New International Version:

*He told them another parable:*

*"The kingdom of heaven is like  
a mustard seed  
that a man took and planted in his field...  
Though it is the smallest of all seeds,  
when it grows,  
it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree,  
so that the birds come and perch in its branches."*

*He told them still another parable:*

*"The kingdom of heaven is like  
yeast  
that a woman took and mixed into 60 pounds of flour  
until it worked all through the dough."  
Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables;  
he did not say anything to them without using a parable.*

*"The kingdom of heaven is like  
treasure  
hidden in a field.  
When a man found it, he hid it again,  
then in his joy went and sold all that he had and bought that field.  
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like*

*a merchant  
looking for fine pearls.  
When he found one pearl of great value,  
he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.  
Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like*

*a net  
that was cast into the lake  
and caught all kinds of fish.  
When it was full, they pulled it up on to the shore.  
Then they sat down, and collected the good fish into baskets but threw the bad away."  
This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

...a tiny mustard seed, yeast in dough, treasure buried in a field, rare pearls, fish nets lurking  
below the waves... the kingdom of heaven is imperceptible, mingled in, buried, below the  
depths... Hidden Kingdom indeed.

Jesus often used this rather enigmatic, imaginative, provocative speech. He spoke in parables, multifaceted gemstones of story, pictures drawn to prod us to puzzle, ask us to participate, say to ourselves, "Now where in world did that come from?" We know this way of talking frustrated his disciples. They wondered, as perhaps we do from time to time, why didn't he just say what he meant? Just a few verses earlier, in Matthew 13, verse 10, as the Message paraphrase puts it,

*The disciples came up and asked, "Why do you tell stories?"  
He replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight."  
(Message Paraphrase: Mt. 13:10-13)*

Against the wall of pedestrian Jerusalem, upon the cliff-sides of Jordan Valley, across the hills of Galilee, Jesus projected images of God's reign; he told ordinary stories about the extraordinary. Engaging the imagination to conjure up the unimaginable, to explain the inexplicable; inviting us to leave behind our practical, pragmatic, every day worlds to enter into a way of seeing and being where God and the activity of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the risen Christ is the primary reality. Unveiling before us the Hidden Kingdom.

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, he is not describing "some heaven light years away" but rather, a dawning reality, life lived now, in the presence of the holy—teaching us, his disciples, to see with a God's-eye view and heart bent to realize what it means to pray Thy Kingdom Come.

The Kingdom is like this, and this, and this, and this. There it is! and there! and there!

So what is it like, this kingdom? Apparently not what we expect. It's like a mustard seed - tiny, a mere dot, a speck. And, interestingly enough, it never really grows into a tree, but rather a shrub at best, 8 to 10 feet tall at most, a pernicious weed really, that is very hard to eradicate. Jesus could have chosen the mighty Cedar to illustrate his point, but no—he chooses the humble, scraggly, annoying, common mustard plant.....

What is it like, this kingdom? It's like yeast, that grey, grainy stuff that was forbidden during Passover, because it symbolizes corruption—the UN-holy—infiltrating all it touches to bubble, churn, and brew up trouble. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast....

What is it like, this kingdom? Not at all what we expect, or desire, or even look for. Not grand, or beautiful, or glorious—not mighty and evident... but rather tiny and insignificant, pernicious and potent, quietly invading your fields, fermenting your dough... doubling and bubbling your 60 pounds of flour—an enormous batch—enough to inaugurate a messianic banquet, perhaps?

What is it like, this kingdom? Buried treasure, X marks the spot... a pearl of such stunning value, you're willing to spend your whole life searching for it ... the Hope Diamond ... the Crown Jewels... breathtaking in value... above all other things—so valuable you will sell everything—all that you own, commit your entire life, trade it all in—to possess it. The kingdom of heaven is precious and rare and elusive—but it's there, to be found by any of us who seek it with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength and are willing—no, eager—to set aside all, to sacrifice all, to give our lives fully to the one who gives us life.

What is it like, this kingdom? The kingdom of Heaven is like a fishnet, floating just beneath the surface, not something that we find at all, but something that is lurking in the depths, waiting to find us and haul us to the surface, gather us in, all peoples together.

Mustard seeds and yeast, buried treasure and scarce pearls, nets bursting with fish of all kinds. Hidden Kingdom, that becomes powerful and joyous and life-altering when revealed to the light—when the seed has sprouted, when the bread is baked, when the treasure discovered, the lost found, when what was secret is known, what was hidden revealed.

Parables, you see, are the secret decoder ring—given to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to discern the kingdom of God is at hand, among you—not in the high holy places or the sacred cathedrals, but hidden in plain sight, in the mundane elements of our everyday lives, in the dripping fishnets, in the bustling market place, in the farmer's field, in the burgeoning garden, before our very noses in the smell of the fresh baked bread.

Parables invite us to wander into our lives and discover what God is up to now.

...like the waitress I met this week who talked about how her husband had been laid off and they were trying to sell their car and needed to downsize their house and wondered if maybe, just maybe, this changing economy is teaching us all to learn new values...

...like the daughter I know who—amidst the strain and grief of attending to her father in hospice—rejoiced at the gift she has been given to spend holy time with her mother...

...like my devil-may-care, don't-worry-be-happy friend who, after recovering from a life-threatening illness, recognized for the first time his need for the community of faith that surrounded and supported him through it all.

...like the smile on your child's face...

...like the first crocus in the spring...

...like the gem-like lake glistening unexpectedly just around the bend...

Hidden Kingdom... the extraordinary grace of God fully engaged and at work within the ordinary—right there before us all... waiting to be discovered if we will only look with expectant eyes and anticipating heart. Thy kingdom come, O Lord, thy hidden kingdom come!