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Farmers, Fishers, Bakers

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Sent #3
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The kingdom of God is like...the kingdom of God is like...the kingdom of God is like...if you are sitting listening to Jesus and he begins that sentence ‘the kingdom of God is like...’ you are on the edge of your seat because you know he is about to reveal something of significance. You want to know what *is* the kingdom of God like. You have ideas, hopes, but mostly you have questions. And now Jesus of Nazareth, the one who knows the scriptures better than any you have ever heard preached, the one who exudes kindness and wisdom and faith, the one some are saying is the Messiah — that Jesus is about to finish the sentence. The kingdom of God is like...but he leaves it hanging for a minute and your mind wanders.

Maybe he will say the kingdom of God is like a pristine, golden palace with opulent gardens and magnificent banquet tables and elevated thrones. Or maybe he will say the kingdom of God is like the stadium welcoming home gladiator champions with confetti and applause and fine wines. Or maybe he will say the kingdom of God is like a perfectly manicured neighborhood of pillared mansions with fountains and sculptures on every corner.

Our mind, left to its own devices, conjures up something quite fantastical when thinking about the kingdom of God. It is holy, regal, majestic, and completely awesome. And so Jesus and his teaching about ‘the kingdom of God is like...’, may have been disappointing to his audience when he started to give them his own visions and descriptors. The Kingdom of God is like a seed, a plant, bread baking, plowing a field, and fishing. What? No royals, no military generals, no celebrities to populate the visions? We thought God was like a Lord or a King or a Ruler, yet Jesus describes God like a farmer, a fisher, and a baker. Were they a little underwhelmed? This sounds like gardening and housework more than the divine realm. Where is the exalted vision of God? Where is the enthroning we imagined? Where are the corridors of power and perfection and piety? Why are we still talking about yeast, and nets, and fields? This is the vision? This is the kingdom of God?

Jesus is bringing the teachings down to earth – literally. What was once otherworldly, foreign, and exalted has now become incarnate, one of us and among us. The God that was far off is now here in the flesh. The divine and the human united together in the person of Jesus Christ – and Jesus is here to translate for us what the kingdom of God is like. Jesus is the like the Rosetta Stone for the language of God. He pairs it down, he parses it out, he defines the terms in language we can understand.

Sally Fisher has a poem about speaking in a language you can understand called “*Where I Come From*”:

We didn't say fireflies
but lightning bugs.
We didn't say carousel
but merry-go-round.
Not seesaw,
teeter-totter
not lollipop,
sucker.
We didn't say pasta, but
spaghetti, macaroni, noodles:
the three kinds.
We didn't get angry:
we got mad.
And we never felt depressed
dismayed, disappointed
disheartened, discouraged
disillusioned or anything,
even unhappy:
just sad.

Mustard seeds, baking yeast, and fishing nets were part of the colloquial language of the farmers, fishers, and bakers of Jesus' day. They were not elite images ungraspable by the common man. They were the vernacular of the people and that is how Jesus chose to translate the kingdom of God into words.

In 2016, a study was done on the liturgy used by the Church of England for its readability, using three formulas for the study of language. In analyzing the parables of Jesus from Matthew's gospel, they found the average sentence length of 13.8 words, less than 1% was polysyllabic words, and less than 5% of the words were unfamiliar. The formula said the readability level of the parables was set for an 11 or 12 year old. In contrast the Church of England's liturgy from the Common Worship Book, had a readability age of 21. This came from longer sentences, unfamiliar vocabulary, and a high occurrence of polysyllabic words. They looked at opening prayers, or collects, and found some of them with 59 word sentences divided into eight different clauses with many long and unfamiliar words.

For example this one sentence: *We beseech Thee, O Lord, let our hearts be graciously enlightened by Thy holy radiance, that we may serve Thee without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life; that so we may escape the darkness of this world, and by Thy guidance attain the land of eternal brightness; through Thy mercy, O blessed Lord, Who doest live and govern all things, world without end. Amen.*

Now I have great affinity for some of the older and more poetic liturgies of the church even with some of the King James Version scattered in for good measure. But what we know about Jesus is that he did not wield flowery or fanciful

language. His words were simple, his messages short AND YET the meanings behind his teachings *still*, to this day, have the power to baffle the most educated, well read biblical scholars in the world.

I mean what does it mean that the kingdom of God is like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a strong towering bush? Or what does it mean that the kingdom of God is like the leaven, which produces enough bread to feed the masses? What does it mean that there is treasure found in the field and the man sells everything to buy the field and gain the treasure? I think for Jesus there is great intention in the words and the images being familiar and common, but the meanings being well out of the scope of the easily defined. To receive the holy mysteries will require some thoughtfulness.

"We had the experience but missed the meaning," T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*, summarizing a common condition. Jesus wanted his followers to have the experiences but not to miss the meaning. There was great meaning in the world around them, in the flowers of the field, the birds of the sky, the bread, the wine, the water. God was not these things but the divine was accessible through these things. God had come into the world to be with the beloved children of God so they could see and hear and touch some sure sign of his love and grace and care.

Two sermons ago, we looked at the first words from Jesus after he left the wilderness saying, "The kingdom of God has come near." Jesus' life was about fulfilling that claim. The kingdom of God has come near in the presence of Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of the divine Word and his actions are a reflection of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like...Jesus touching a leper. Is like Jesus talking with the unclean woman. Is like Jesus dining with the tax collector. The kingdom of God is like Jesus – is Jesus. Jesus is the kingdom of God coming near to us so that we might see and we might believe and we might respond. Jesus' life, who he was, what he did, and how he taught was the reminder for us that God's realm is not some esoteric realm of external and inaccessible divinity.

Rather the kingdom of God is as near as that bread you have on your table. The kingdom of God is as near as the plant you watered this morning. The kingdom of God is as near as the fish you will eat for dinner. The kingdom of God is as near as the Savior that is right in front of you and seeking relationship with you.

Jesus had every possible image and metaphor at his disposal and yet he chose the ordinary and the mundane to describe for us the kingdom of God. I was thinking about the audience here at GPC this week – not populated with farmers, fishers, and bakers but lawyers, and lobbyist, and consultants - oh my! Our language is specific to our context and our people and our professions and our politics. When I moved to DC someone at the church told me that this city had the highest density per capita of hardcover books, the most graduate degrees, and the most German engineered cars (okay I made that last one up).

We might like to think we are well educated and well informed – a cut above the common man. Fine, fine to think what you will, but where does that get us in regards to our faith? Does it get you closer to the divine? Does it get you greater clarity of your morals and convictions? Does it provide you with certainty in regards to the mysteries of faith? You can have as many fancy books and collections of diplomas as you'd like but unfortunately there is no direct correlation here to authenticity or strength of faith - bad news, Georgetown.

What is the correlation then to authenticity and strength of faith? Hum. For me, the people who are most inspiring because of their faith wield a powerful combination of the openness of their hearts, readiness of their minds, and humility of their spirits. With open hearts you can meet a man named Jesus, and respond to his call to love God and love one another. With ready minds, you can hear the teachings about simple things and be led to believe in the greatest mysteries of humankind. With humble spirits, you can acknowledge you are a work in progress and must rely heavily on the grace of God. The teachings of Jesus, the parables of the gospel, are there for us not to impart knowledge but faith, not answers but visions, not proof but hope. The question for the audience is: Are we open and ready and humble enough to hear this good news and respond with our whole lives?

Jesus wanted his teachings to be plain enough that all could hear and be led to believe. And Jesus wanted his teachings to be momentous enough that the hearer might realize they were witnessing just what the kingdom of God is like.

Amen.