

The human mind tries to reduce the *unwieldy*,  
simplify the *complex*, and  
make concrete the *abstract*.

That's why Jesus turns to parables,  
when trying to convey  
unwieldy, complex, abstract ideas  
like The Kingdom of God.

I'm still confused about the Kingdom of God.  
Why doesn't Jesus just say what he means,  
like other good rabbis?

(If anyone can speak with authority on heaven,  
it would be Jesus!)

Yet he chooses the indirect approach,  
using earthy metaphors  
to describe heavenly realities.

The Kingdom of Heaven, it turns out,  
is not really a kingdom  
and not really in heaven. Hmm.

*The Kingdom of Heaven  
is like a grain of mustard.*

*Someone sows mustard in a field.*

*Now it's the smallest of seeds,  
but when it is grown  
it towers over other herbs like a tree,  
so that birds settle in its branches.*

Well, we moderns might get it:  
Great outcomes from tiny beginnings.  
But if we were among Jesus' audience,  
that metaphor wouldn't work.

For them mustard was a weed.

What farmer would scatter  
mustard weed in with a crop?

Jesus takes another tack.

*The kingdom of heaven is like leaven  
that a woman hides in 10 gallons of flour,  
until the whole of it is fermented.*

Oops. Leavening is a trigger-word,  
like weed, for his Jewish audience.

Leavening is often a metaphor for corruption.  
Leavening makes dough less pure,  
in a ritual sense.

Twice a year, at the feasts of  
Passover and Unleavened Bread,  
a household was to be swept clean  
of all leavening, lest it contaminate  
the flat bread baked on those occasions.

The audience isn't buying  
that the Kingdom of Heaven  
is a hidden ingredient, already in the world.

But at least Jesus now has  
the full attention of his listeners.

He presses on. This time, a story:  
*The Kingdom of Heaven*

*is like treasure a person finds  
in a field, and then reburies.*

*In joy the person sells all possessions  
and purchases that very field.*

This situation actually happens  
to Jews of his time.

Given their history of repeat foreign occupation,  
Jews being exiled

would bury valued belongings,  
hoping to retrieve them later, upon return.

This time the audience gets it:  
Kingdom. Hidden treasure. Value.

Jesus builds on that:

*Finding the Kingdom*

*is like the merchant of fine pearls  
who comes upon an exceptionally good one  
and immediately sells off*

*the entire inventory to purchase  
that one precious pearl.*

Like the Buried Treasure,

this parable shows the value of the Kingdom.

It also shows the importance  
of *seeking* the Kingdom,  
and *recognizing* it when it is found.

The main point the audience takes from  
these four parables

is that the Kingdom of Heaven  
is already here, out in the open,  
if you know what to look for.

It is hidden in plain sight.  
 But it's worth the search.  
 Parables are meant to subvert  
 the assumptions of faithful Jews.  
 They challenge conventions  
 and contradict traditions.  
 The whole storyline of Jesus  
 is subversive and surprising.  
 By the parable of his death, Jesus says that  
 the Kingdom of Heaven is a cross:  
 pole planted deep, cross-bar spread defiantly.  
 By the parable of his resurrection,  
 Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven  
 is an empty tomb, wondrous and hopeful.  
 By the cross, God's grace  
 is proclaimed sacrificially.  
 By an empty tomb, God's power  
 is demonstrated triumphantly.  
 Disciples must not lose that sense  
 of God's costly grace.  
 I'd like to try a modern parable  
 that explores the analogy of Leverage.  
 The Kingdom of Heaven is like a bank loan.  
 A little of your own money,  
 (the down payment)  
 is leveraged with a lot of the bank's money  
 to purchase something of high value, like a home.  
 The transaction benefits both you and the bank.  
 The analogy even goes a little further.  
 Every bank loan actually leverages  
 the local economy.  
 It works like this:  
 Banks make money on deposits  
 of customers' money  
 by lending it to borrowers at higher interest  
 than they pay their customers.  
 By Federal law, banks must set aside  
 3 to 10 percent of their total deposits  
 as reserve, to cover defaults.  
 (Otherwise, banks would probably lend  
 all of their deposits.)

Suppose a bank gets a deposit of \$100  
 and it sets aside 10 percent as a reserve.  
 The bank lends out the remaining \$90,  
 to be repaid with interest.  
 The loaned money  
 flows back into the community,  
 thru the purchase of goods and services  
 from merchants.  
 When the merchants deposit their receipts,  
 banks set aside 10 percent  
 and lend the rest of that.  
 Potentially another \$81 flows into the economy.  
 The process keeps repeating,  
 leveraging small deposits into greater wealth  
 than the cash actually on deposit.  
 Borrowing, even with the added interest,  
 allows an average Joe or Jane  
 to leverage what they have  
 for something far more valuable.  
 Leverage often works out well  
 for everyone concerned.  
 But it can hurt one or more of the parties,  
 if good faith is not practiced all along the line.  
 When there isn't good faith it creates problems  
 like the sub-prime mortgage crisis  
 that began in 2003.  
 Here's a news item from the start of the crisis:  
 "Falling U.S. home prices will force  
 financial firms to write down \$1 trillion  
 from their balance sheets,  
 crimping bank lending  
 and sparking sales of assets."  
 About 25 million homes  
 are at risk of negative equity –  
 being worth less than their mortgage,  
 which could lead to more foreclosures  
 and a further drop in house prices."  
 That's pretty much the way things went  
 for 9 or 10 years.  
 The cycle of building wealth reversed.  
 Leverage weakened.

Borrowers had to put up more of their own money.  
You and I, as disciples, should care about  
the financial system of this country.

Here's why:

As Jesus says, the Kingdom of Heaven  
is made up of farmers and bakers,  
merchants and fishers.

The Kingdom is about  
fulfillment of human dreams  
for a shared sense of community on this planet.

The Kingdom of Heaven  
is in our homes and families.

Therefore, the Kingdom is threatened  
by lack of leverage in the financial markets.

My point is that the Kingdom of God  
also works on leverage.

Acts of love and compassion  
are deposited into the vault of one's life.

Such deposits are moral capital  
for the building of God's kingdom.

Acts of *charity* raise moral capital  
for the building of God's kingdom.

Gestures of *peace* leverage moral capital  
for the building of God's kingdom.

To take the analogy a step further,  
the Kingdom of Heaven charges interest.

Interest equals the cost of discipleship.

Discipleship shares a root  
with the word discipline.

The interest we pay on discipleship  
is the discipline needed to keep alert  
for signs of the Kingdom while

we keep our hands to the plow.

We might plow into a buried treasure.

Critics even in Jesus' own day  
were beginning to question  
whether or not there were signs  
of the in-breaking Kingdom of God.

The world then did not seem much different  
from the way it was before Jesus came.

In our day, signs are even harder to see.

The powers and principalities of the world  
so dominate public awareness  
that it's hard to see the small pearls of  
righteousness, unless the pearls are leveraged.  
But the Kingdom always finds some leverage.  
Like the dandelion that keeps popping up,  
even after you pour concrete over it,  
the Kingdom finds a way through.  
The Kingdom may be small.  
But like a seed, it's unstoppable  
when it finds fertile soil.  
The Kingdom will find you, if you let it.  
An act of mercy here, a plea for forgiveness there.  
Receive forbearance here, an unexpected joy there.

"The Kingdom comes by inches,"  
says a seminary professor,  
"and we must celebrate every small gain we see."

The Kingdom is all-encompassing.  
Which brings us, finally, to the net.

Now, it's time for Jesus to work in  
a Judgment Day angle  
like he did in last week's parable,  
the Wheat and the Tares.

*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet  
thrown into the sea,*

*gathering in fish of every kind.*

*When full, the net is hauled ashore,  
where pickers toss the sellable fish into a basket  
and throw the rest away.*

The dragnet is a gracious image  
if we imagine Jesus as the one who casts the net.  
Jesus harvests all, without distinction.

Small and large. Predators and prey.  
Pure and impure. Jesus culls the catch,  
keeping the "useable ones" for the Kingdom  
and throwing the others back  
for rehabilitation, perhaps to be caught  
and kept the next time.

When angels sort good from bad  
for the last time,

that moment, says Jesus, will be the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven.  
 That’s when God’s purpose for creation, all creation, will prevail eternally.  
 For now, the Kingdom of Heaven is here and is not yet here.  
 We find ourselves between the time of Christ’s incarnation signaling the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven and the end-time moment when the Kingdom is fulfilled.  
 We ought to relish this time, searching for and discovering hidden treasure, feeling energized by the holy Spirit.  
 It is not too late for us to reach people who have not yet made room in their lives for the peace of Christ.  
 Reaching people with the Gospel is more important than converting them.  
 The Gospel is potent enough to penetrate the powers and principalities of the world on its own.  
 God has encoded a message in the Kingdom’s DNA.  
 The message has creative power.  
 Let us collectively pray, with all sincerity, *Thy Kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven.*  
 Jesus’ Kingdom parables remind us of the unexpectedness of God’s work in our midst.  
 The Kingdom takes us by surprise, appearing in the spaces of our lives where we least expect God.  
 We do see Kingdom leverage – people working together to meet a human need, a little bit here, a little bit there.  
 It’s Kingdom-building by inches.  
 That requires a disciplined eye.  
 It takes discipline to see the evidence of the Kingdom already at work in our midst.  
 It takes discipline to withhold judgment until all the evidence is in.  
 And evidence of the Kingdom is not all in.

It’s still accumulating.  
 Judgment Day will have to wait.  
 As disciples, we act in faith that the Kingdom is building.  
 Faith is impossible to sustain all by yourself.  
 So the Holy Spirit brings seekers of the Kingdom together for mutual support.  
 More leverage.  
 One commentator calls the result the Kin-dom of God.  
 Peaceable community is a promise dating to Abraham, prophesied by Isaiah and Ezekiel, and celebrated by angels at Jesus’ birth.  
 The Church is one way (and not the only way) that the Kingdom has leverage in the world.  
 Says a Lutheran pastor in Seattle, “I personally believe that the reign is when God rules over everything to do with the human race – our intelligence, language, technology, medicine, quality of life and governance.”  
 In his Kingdom parables, Jesus tries to shrink the immensity of God’s relationship with creation to a manageable scale – a seed, a measure of flour, a pearl, a treasure chest.  
 He trains disciples for disciplined living – seeking, acting out, and celebrating the Kingdom.  
 Jesus enrolls disciples in God’s ongoing project.  
 Rather than reducing life to hard and fast rules, Jesus leavens the loaf.  
 Where Jewish law would keep things separate (crops, foods, people), Jesus gathers together and unites.  
 God is sowing seeds of the Kingdom everywhere, with extravagant generosity.  
 The harvest is a long way off.  
 God invites us to leverage the common-wealth by coming together for the aid of the Kingdom.  
 Amen.