

- 1) *Have you understood all this?* asks Jesus. *Yesss!* they reply.
I seriously doubt that—don't you?
Maybe the disciples are worried that if they answer NO,
Jesus might launch into ANOTHER Parable Rip about the Reign of God.
They've been blitzed already with more than they can wrap their minds around.
HAVE they understood all this?—Not likely!
- 2) This isn't the first time they've been overwhelmed.
It's the third Teaching Burst from Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.
 - Teaching Burst One—the Sermon on the Mount:
 - *Folks who seem cursed are blessed*, says he.
 - *So turn the other cheek, go the second mile*
 - *And don't worry about food or clothes because God clothes lilies and feeds the birds*
 - Teaching Burst Two—Marching Orders for a teaching/healing mission:
 - *Take next to nothing for your provision or protection*, Jesus tells them
 - *Ask for food and shelter from those you seek to help*
 - Now Jesus climbs aboard a boat to speak with crowds on the shore.
I imagine disciples rolling their eyes: *Here he goes again!*
- 3) No retelling ever tames these parables about the Kingdom of Heaven.
 - Two weeks ago we heard one about a curious crop planting strategy—
seed scattered everywhere on unforgiving soils.
BUT a huge harvest anyway—beyond the wildest dreams of farmers back then.
 - Last week we heard a parable about a strange crop weeding strategy:
leaving wheat to mix with weeds—poisonous weeds.
BUT the reapers will be angels, the crop will be fine, and the weeds will be burned.
 - Today—we get a veritable metaphorical meteor shower—
six more parables, one upon another:
 - 1) God's Reign is like its very own weed—mustard weed—think *kudzu*.
BUT hey, the seeds become bushes big enough for birds.
 - 2) God's Reign is like yeast—think *mold* or *rust*
(in that day “yeast” and “corruption” were seen as synonymous).
BUT this “corruption,” kneaded by one strong baker woman makes
from fifty pounds of flour, bread to feed an army.
 - 3) God's Reign is like a guy who lucks out—in a field he stumbles on treasure;
hides it—buys the field—on the sly—BUT.
 - 4) God's Reign is also like a methodical merchant
who finally finds the pearl he's looking for—and buys it fair and square.
(These buyers give all they've got for what they get.
Let's hope their Heavenly Father, who clothes the flowers and feeds the birds,
does both for both, since neither has any money left for either.)
 - 5) The Kingdom of Heaven is like net fishing—
scooping up everything; not sorting it until the fishing is done—BUT:
 - 6) Kingdom scribes who sift through household treasures—they sort as they go—
not (like the fishermen) keeping what's good, pitching what's bad,
but integrating what's old and new.

4) **Have you understood all this? Good for you! Can we talk?**

The Kingdom of Heaven sounds like the Ultimate Enigma.

“Enigma,” is a good translation of “parable,” actually.

And Jesus is being deliberately enigmatic—

messing with the minds of those who DON’T see because they WON’T see.

Aesop’s Fables these parables are NOT.

But neither are they ink blots—meaning whatever.

5) **Common threads run through them—**

threads interwoven with earlier Jesus teachings in Matthew’s Gospel.

Here are six:

- 1) **God’s Realm cannot be reduced to a single image, catch phrase, or idea.**
Yet—though it’s beyond description—it’s everywhere you look.
- 2) **The Kingdom of Heaven isn’t ethereal, it’s earthy.**
Like weeds, seeds, bushes, birds, farming, fishing, treasure hunting.
- 3) **God’s Reign is evident not only in the ordinary, but also in the eyebrow-raising—**
in the organically messy, the morally muddy.
- 4) **The Commonwealth of God is utterly antithetical to politics as usual.**
It refuses to conquer with intimidating power plays.
- 5) **It requires hard choices—sometimes to wait rather than to act.**
When acting IS called for—decisive action, but not destructive action.
- 6) **God’s Commonwealth is a condition we can’t manufacture;**
but we need to work toward it as best we can.

6) **SO—God’s Reign is a mysterious interplay of divine grace and human grit,**
of careful calculation and sheer serendipity.

It takes our energy, ingenuity, persistence, and discernment.

Yet God finds subtle, even surreptitious ways of working with and around our efforts—
whether strong or weak, smart or stupid, righteous or sinful.

St. Paul says it this way: *All things work together for good to those who love God,*
And nothing in all creation—nothing can separate us from God’s love.

The Kingdom of Heaven offers no easy exits, no quick fixes;

but it keeps coming toward us, wherever we are—ready or not.

7) **That sounds abstract—let’s hear it in a story.**

Tonight we listened to a portion of the Genesis saga—
the tale of a deeply dysfunctional family.

- **Jacob works seven years for the girl of his dreams.**
The morning after his wedding, he wakes to find he’s married to her sister.
(Jacob spends a lot of time dreaming.)
His uncle tells him that if he’ll fake it for the seven-day marriage feast,
he can have a second bride—the one he wants.
NOT two for the price of one—for her, he must work seven years longer.
Jacob is cheated by his uncle—like he’s cheated his own brother—
and like he’ll keep cheating his uncle for years to come.
- **From there, the story goes further South still.**
I’ll spare you the details—you get the picture.

From this tragic, sordid mess, God seems AWOL;

But, look again—the storyteller shows us God working at both ends.

- Fleeing the brother whom he’s cheated, Jacob has a dream—
a ladder of angels bringing earth up to heaven, and heaven down to earth.

He hears God say:

*Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,
for I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.*

- Bent on cheating, Jacob seems to forget THAT dream; he’s dreaming of riches.
His schemes are successful—gathering his ill-gotten gain, he heads back home—
only to hear that the brother he’s cheated is coming for him.

- God and Jacob wrestle all night at Jabbok Brook.

Jacob holds his own, finally blurting out: *I won’t let you go until you bless me.*

God confers on Jacob a permanent limp, and a name-changing blessing.

No longer: “Trickster Jacob;” he’s now: “Israel—God-wrestler.”

- The next scene finds the two brothers reconciling—sobbing for sorrow, weeping for joy.
The Reign of God? Flashes appear if we’re paying attention.

8) Engrossed as we are now in layers of social dysfunction, it’s hard to track the Reign of God.

It’s easy to get distracted, to lose direction,

to get fixated on what’s so wrong, and what we think will set things right.

These parables of Jesus, this assurance from St. Paul, this story of Jacob—

all these call us from squinty-eyed vision into more spacious vision.

Where do you see glimpses of the coming Reign of God?

In my mind’s eye here are five:

Congressman Elijah Cummings, Doctor Tony Fauci, Congressman John Lewis,
Bishop Marianne Budde, Parishioner Denny Shaw—

(check out Denny’s obituary by Pat Fitzgerald in last week’s Post.

In Denny’s life you’ll see what in the world displays the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven: Do we understand all this? Not likely.

But for this Commonwealth Reign of God, we’re on the lookout, nonetheless.

This we know for sure—God’s Kingdom is Coming—ready or not.