

9th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 2023
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I heard about the Academy Award winning movie “Everything, Everywhere, All at Once,” when it released. Immediately after, I saw rave reviews from people I knew and whose movie tastes I trust. “Just go see it,” they would say, with little description of what the movie was about. But it wasn’t until I got on an airplane, going who knows where, that I finally got to see it. And without ruining any of the plot, it’s safe to say that this film lives up to its title. It is all-out, no holds barred, onslaught of visual, mental, and emotional stimulation. As the name of the movie implies, it is a trippy film that I would best describe as part-comedy, part-drama, part-action movie, part-sci fi, part something else that has yet to be defined. So, there I sat, on an airplane, surrounded by strangers, laughing to myself, furrowing my brow in confusion, eyes wide open in surprise, and at the end of the movie, there I sat, struggling to hold back tears. After the sensory, emotional, and mental journey I had been on, I asked myself, “What just happened?” Did I understand what I had seen? No, not at all. I had experienced it. I had felt it. It had viscerally moved me. But did I get it? Did I understand the movie? To be honest? No. Absolutely not.

And that’s exactly what I wish the disciples would have admitted in our passage today. I wish they would have said that none of what Jesus said in these parables makes sense. After taking the disciples through this onslaught of cryptic parables about the kingdom of heaven, with an overload of beautiful images and active characters and important objects and decisive actions at play – with nary a one explained, at least in this passage – surely the disciples must have felt as clueless as I did on that airplane. Mustard seeds and sourdough starter, treasure hidden in a field and pearls of great price, nets thrown into the sea and fish separated into baskets. “Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks. I so desperately want the disciples to look at Jesus with clueless expressions on their faces. “No, Jesus. Actually, we don’t get it. You’re going to have to give us more here.” But all together they respond, “Yes.” I’m sorry, but somebody in this ragtag group is lying. Our author is painting these disciples with a very kind brush. Because none of these parables actually make it any easier to understand what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Of course, we know what the kingdom of heaven is not like. That’s a lot easier.

The kingdom of heaven is not like the yard sale my brother and I had a few weeks ago. A sale where my parent’s work to accumulate stuff for more than 50 years spilled out onto borrowed tables and a concrete driveway...where eager people showed up at 7am to walk past the crystal glassware my mom loved but never drank out of and what I suspect were expensive silver serving pieces that sat in a cabinet but never made it to a meal. The kingdom of heaven is not a lifetime devoted to accumulating useless stuff.

The kingdom of heaven is not like the school board where I live in Richmond, VA having to consider a 15-point security plan to decrease school violence and to address the constant

threat of gun violence in our schools, rather than having the luxury to focus on actual student learning.

The kingdom of heaven is not like sea life that's choking on our plastic waste or studies that show our drinking water has growing amounts of microplastics in it.

The kingdom of heaven is not like the fear that some of our siblings have - fear that who they are will get them killed as they walk down the street, or go to the store, or lay quietly in their apartment.

The kingdom of heaven is not like, well...you can fill in the blank, I'm sure.

We know what the kingdom of heaven is NOT like. We can feel it in our bones when we see selfishness, violence, destruction, and fear play out before us. So, what we want and desperately need is for Jesus to explain these parables to us. Everything's at stake in a world like the one we live in. And these cryptic parables couched in ancient Middle Eastern cultural references just aren't cutting it for us. If Jesus wants us to actually live into the kingdom of heaven then shouldn't he make it clear what we're supposed to be doing? It seems a little unfair. It feels like trying to hit a moving target with foggy glasses on, even when volumes upon volumes have been written about these parables through the years. I mean, you could get crushed under the weight of books that try to explain these parables that Jesus decided not to explain.

NT scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes about the parables that are before us in her book *Short Stories by Jesus*. As she looks at these parables, she traces the unhelpful ways that people have read and interpreted these stories through the years. She identifies how people have misguidedly interpreted them as allegories with each symbolic element having a corresponding reality. The pearl of great price is salvation and the merchant is the person searching for meaning in life. You get the idea. Or people have read them in ways that lead to anti-Jewish thinking – reading things like yeast and mustard seeds as “unclean” foods (they weren't) and thus saying that Jesus is rejecting purity laws (he wasn't), which reinforces dangerous views for our Jewish neighbors. Or there's a danger of projecting our own values onto them by ignoring Jesus's cultural and historical context. She's right, I think. And by looking closely at Jesus's culture, she opens up new doors for meaning, just as she closes up others. But she still doesn't offer definitive explanations of these parables. Just some possibilities.

It sure would be nice if Jesus had given us a little clarity, because if the best and brightest biblical scholars can't pin them down, then the rest of us are sunk. So, tell us what you mean, Jesus. If you explain it, Jesus, then we can form a task force and an implementation committee. If you tell us what you mean, then we can write it into our bylaws. If you give us answers, Jesus, then we can stop disagreeing with one another. If you clarify, Jesus, then maybe we'll know exactly how to lobby our politicians – or better yet, they'd already know what to do. If you give us that explanation, Jesus, then maybe we can stop the church from hemorrhaging members across denominations. If you enlighten us, Jesus, then we wouldn't feel so clueless as we

pursue this kingdom of heaven business. It sure would be nice to come back to the end of this passage and be able to say “Yes!” with the disciples.

It’s frustrating to not have the answers. Most days, we’d rather have clear cut explanations and clarity. I know I do. We want to know exactly what to believe, what to do, when to do it, and why. I sometimes think that as a church, we’ve operated as if we do have all the answers. So, for the past 200 years, we’ve made church manageable and secure. We’ve made faith predictable and comfortable. We’ve mitigated risk. We are pragmatic people. We want details. We want explanations for how to do church and how to be faithful people. We want a concrete plan, especially if we’re going to fund this thing from our own pockets. We want roadmaps to the kingdom of heaven. And there’s no shortage of people who say they have all the answers, who are more than ready to tell us we’re doing it wrong, who are sure and certain that they know the shape of the kingdom of heaven – who is in, who is out, and what it all means. But I wonder if in our desire for clarity, certainty, for explanation, for answers, that we’ve made the kingdom of heaven less than Jesus intended...if we’ve settled for a vision of the kingdom of heaven that’s too small. Smaller than what Jesus hoped for.

If we let our thirst for explanation and clarity and the exact right meaning get the best of us, we miss a larger point. If our desire is to definitively figure out the parables, to be able to explain the kingdom of heaven in full detail, then we settle for less than the kingdom of heaven. It’s so easy to get wrapped up in trying to understand and explain *what* Jesus is saying that we end up looking past *how* Jesus is saying it. It might be strange to say, but *how* Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven is just as, if not more important, than *what* he is trying to say. While WE want the blueprint for the kingdom of heaven, the schematics, the business plan, the handbook, the owner’s manual, the computer code, the line-item budget...all Jesus seems to want to do is spark our imaginations, to draw us into curiosity, and to invite us to playful wonder and questions. Not explanations, and to-do lists, and rules, and action plans. No. Little stories about seeds and dough and treasure and merchants and nets.

When my daughter was about 4, we would often ride in the car through the suburbs of Atlanta, where we lived. When we inevitably got stuck in traffic, parental terror would strike me. Because it would mean at least a 30 or 45-minute delay to wherever we were headed. So, one day, in a panic, we started to play a game to pass the time. When we came to a standstill with no end in sight, I would simply say, “Once upon a time...” And one of us would begin to make up a story on the spot. When about a minute had passed, the person who was telling the story would stop and the other person had to pick up where the first person left off. We would laugh and make the frustration of being stuck in traffic bearable through the wild twists and turns of a story with a million holes in the plot and more questions than answers. Now, how exactly did the princess sprout wings? And why? Neither of us knew where the story was headed or what it meant. And that wasn’t the point. As a parent, it was about creating a different world than the one we were in at the moment. It was about cultivating her capacity for imagination and curiosity and creating a new world together amidst the reality we were in at the moment.

I think that's what Jesus is up to in telling these stories. I think that's exactly where the kingdom of heaven begins for us. Sure, he wants to tell us something. But having all the answers and being certain would mean that the ball is entirely in our court. If we had all the answers, then WE could make the right decisions, carry out the plan, write the policies and procedures, and follow them to a T. Explanations and certainty would mean that WE were in control and that, well, we wouldn't really need God for this kingdom of heaven stuff. **But when we put away our need for explanations and certainty, when we stop trying to have all the answers...we open ourselves up to the imagination, wonder, curiosity, and creativity that lies at the heart of the kingdom of heaven. And that's exactly when we can witness God at work. That's when we make room for God to work in us and through us.**

In these unresolved, unexplained, baffling short stories, Jesus shows us something about the place of wonder and imagination in the kingdom of heaven, about curiosity and creativity, about playfulness and questions. As far as I can tell in the parables of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is for dreamers, for visionaries, for people willing to tell a new story. It's for people who catch a glimpse of what the world can be when God is at work and then start to paint the picture. It's for people who have not foreclosed on the possibilities of what God is doing, how God is doing it, and who God can use along the way. It's for seekers and those with big questions. It's for people who aren't afraid to dream, "What if...," even if we've never done it that way before. It's for people who can spot God at work in the most ordinary of things and begin to wonder what God might be up to next. It's for the people who don't have faith all figured out and aren't afraid to admit that they don't have all the answers. It's for those of us who come to faith with openness – ready to be surprised by the God who's at work behind the scenes and who uses the smallest acts of faith to transform the world.

It's for people who believe deep down that God is relentlessly at work redeeming, renewing, restoring, and recreating the world and who trust that God invites us to join in that work with all that we have, even when we can't explain it.

"Have you understood all this?" No, Jesus. To be honest, we haven't. And I hope we never will.

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