

The Unconventional Wisdom of Jesus' Parables

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a.

“CW” for *Conventional Wisdom* is my favorite section of Newsweek magazine. That’s the rather brief and sardonic review of the week’s news through a series of short synopsis’s with *up down* or *neutral* arrows. The most recent online issue gives a thumb down to Ford Motor Co. for the largest ever ¼ figure net loss (\$7.4 billion) in corporate earnings. It gives a thumbs up to the late Heath Ledger for his creepy performance as *the Joker* in *Dark Knight*, the new Batman movie. It gives neutral wait and see ratings to both Barrack Obama and John McCain as to who will win more points in the public posturing particularly over foreign politics, but a thumbs up to Ted Kennedy for making a surprise visit to the Senate in the midst of his radiation therapy for brain cancer to help rescue a Medicare bill. It also gives two thumbs down for gaffes by Jessie Jackson caught on microphone obscenely dissing Obama and now former McCain Economic Advisor Phil Graham who called Americans who complain about the economy, “*whiners*.” I’ve never quite figured out whether the up and down arrows in Newsweek ultimately celebrate conventional wisdom or try to debunk it. But they are certainly entertaining.

Conventional Wisdom is a term to describe ideas or explanations that are generally accepted as true by the public. Although they are widely held they are unexamined and not necessarily true. Nowhere is the conventional wisdom about faith and religion debunked more thoroughly than in Jesus’ parables.

Jesus said *the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the field*. The *conventional wisdom* would be that the Kingdom of Heaven should be compared to something grand and important. The Kingdom of Heaven should be compared to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC (the world’s largest cathedral), not to a tiny *mustard seed*. Later on in Matthew Jesus told the disciples that if they only had faith the size of a mustard seed they could move mountains. The *conventional wisdom* would say that we need great faith or great credentials. If we only had a faith like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Ghandi look what we could do. Or if we only had the right degree from the right University look how brilliant our faith could be, but unfortunately since I don’t have the faith of Ghandi or MLK, nor the right degree, as it is my faith doesn’t stack up. So why bother trying?

Contrary to *conventional wisdom* Jesus told us that our faith doesn’t have to be grand or impressive, nor do we need the right credentials. All we need is the little seed, the tiny possibility of faith and to risk sowing it in the ground so that it might grow and then marvelous things can happen. The *Kingdom of Heaven* is like the mustard seed possibility of my getting excited about a ministry of service to people in need. It is like the mustard seed possibility of my beginning to study and explore the words and meaning of Holy Scripture. It is like the mustard seed possibility of my beginning to become more involved in Christian community. It is like the mustard seed possibility of a new step or a new beginning. If that possibility is planted and allowed to germinate great things will come from it. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that seed.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it was all leavened. The *conventional wisdom* is that the Kingdom of Heaven should be visible, should be large and splashy. At the very least the Kingdom of Heaven ought to be related to visible achievements that we can quantify. We should be able to measure the growth of the Kingdom of Heaven by our large buildings, by numbers of parishioners, by productivity, by advertising, by big budgets, by large auditoriums and stadiums filled with satisfied customers, by the amount of publicity, by TV audience ratings, and by the popularity of our leaders. The American evangelical religious scene is filled with the belief in *conventional wisdom* that the Kingdom of Heaven should be large and splashy. English born theologian J I Packard once complained that American Christianity is “*success oriented, manipulative and self centered. It is 3,000 miles wide and one inch deep.*”

But Jesus that the Kingdom of Heaven is hidden. It is like yeast bubbling away that allows the dough to rise, but at the same time draws no attention to itself. Jesus picture of the Kingdom of Heaven undercuts our success-oriented, self-centered need to show results. The important work of the Kingdom of Heaven is subversive. Jesus’ love is subversive. The more we practice his love, the more we let his life seep into our relationships, our ethics and into the life of his Church, the greater will be the results – not the visible growth of Christianity or the Church as an institution, but the growth of love and service and the small miracles that happen every day in the lives of God’s people.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like buried treasure in a field or an extremely valuable pearl. Here again Jesus goes against *conventional wisdom*. Does not conventional wisdom teach that we should pick our church to best meet our needs? Much like we might shop for a vacuum cleaner, looking for one that works well and doesn’t cost too much money and doesn’t require sales people to come knocking at our door. *Conventional wisdom* is that we shop for a faith community that helps us feel good without demanding too much from us. As a nation of *consumers* religion is just another product that we choose among many competing brands in the religious marketplace. Our choice should be personal, private and convenient.

Jesus’ unconventional wisdom is that the life of God is worth giving up everything you have to claim for your own. And in fact the life of God claims us as much as we claim it. Like falling in love you give your heart and soul and body to the beloved – no halfway measure will do. Elsewhere Jesus said that “*those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.*” The Kingdom of Heaven is like a buried treasure. It costs nothing less than your whole life to enter.

In the last of the 5 parables collected in this Gospel saying Jesus compared the Kingdom of heaven to a great fishing net that when brought up from the deep caught fish of every kind. Why would Jesus want to invite fish of every kind into his Kingdom? Doesn’t he know that birds of a feather like to flock together? 40 years ago Martin Luther King, Jr.

said that 11:00 a.m., Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. That's still largely true today. There are white churches, black churches, Hispanic churches, and ethnic churches of every stripe and hue. The general rule for the Church is don't mingle; don't mix.

But Jesus' unconventional wisdom is that we are all different kinds of fish collected in one great net. The Church of Christ, the people of God are multi-ethnic and multi-hued and the Kingdom of God collects them all together as one family. Jesus calls all types and varieties of fish and people to share new life together in his Kingdom. A wide diversity of his people should indeed represent the fullness and richness of his Kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not necessarily large. It can have the tiniest of beginnings, but it is alive and growing. The Kingdom of Heaven may be hidden and unseen but it is active and alive and bubbling behind the scenes. The Kingdom of Heaven is subversive, working beneath the surface of our lives and institutions. The Kingdom of Heaven is precious beyond everything we could ever possess. The Kingdom Heaven goes beyond our narrow vision. It is wide and embraces all types and conditions of people, even those we might want to exclude. The Kingdom of Heaven is not dependent upon us, nor controlled by us; it is God's own Kingdom, not ours, at God's direction not at our beck and call. The Kingdom of Heaven, like Jesus himself, is always surprising us, always upsetting our conventional wisdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is God's rule right in the midst of our earthly world. Jesus' most basic message is that in him, his life, his teaching, his fellowship, the Kingdom of Heaven is near. **Amen.**