

Have you ever tried to explain to a friend who had never visited New Hampshire before, how to get somewhere, say, in Stratham? It can be a bit disconcerting when you start to describe what for you is so familiar, and you look up to see descending over your friend's eyes a haze as you come to realize he or she hasn't a clue what you're talking about!

It must have been that way sometimes for Jesus, talking with his new friends, the folks we've come to know collectively as the disciples, about the Kingdom of God. They (like us) were so caught up in living day to day in the world as they knew it that they must have found it almost impossible to even imagine a way of looking at things that was so totally different from anything they had ever known.

And so Jesus resorted to parables: little stories, sometimes just images, to get beneath the usual way of seeing and thinking about things. We can imagine Jesus, walking with his disciples, suddenly realizing, as they spoke together, that these disciples didn't really understand the abundance of the life of the Kingdom – its irresistible force, the promises it held. How do you get people to really commit to a new way of living if they can't even imagine what it's like?

So Jesus used simple but compelling images and set them before his listeners: the parables. "The Kingdom of Heaven." It sounds so foreign to our everyday thinking. What's Jesus talking about? What is this incredible way of living which he's promising to you and me and in which we can grow together right now, even in the midst of our day to day lives? Do not we, as much as the original disciples, need some kind of "mental image" of this "Kingdom of Heaven" that can help us embrace it even if we don't quite understand it?

So he starts by taking these agrarian folks down a path they will understand. He starts by talking about seeds and how they grow. He tells them the Kingdom of Heaven is like the smallest of seeds that you have ever seen – the mustard seed. Take even the tiniest seed and plant it in the ground and it can grow beyond your wildest dreams. "Can you believe in the possibility of this life I have been talking about with you?" he asks them. "You must! For if you believe in that life and its possibility, then you will see it."

In fact, the life of the Kingdom is growing among us whether we cooperate or not. It is an irresistible force which cannot be stopped. It's like the yeast, the leaven, which a baker "hides" in three measures of flour so that his loaf of bread will rise.

Now, if I were telling this parable to my friends for the first time, I would probably tell them a story that would connect with their experience. I'm no farmer, and neither are most of you. So rather than telling a farming story, let's make up a character we can connect with. I'll call her Judy.

Judy would be the kind of person for whom everything always seems to go wrong. If Judy goes skiing, you can count on her falling and fracturing a leg or an arm. If she's walking down a country lane on a bright summer day and pauses for a moment to lean on the end of a long picket fence, I can assure you it would topple.

In any case, one day, let's say Judy decides to bake bread. She takes out the recipe and carefully gathers all the ingredients it calls for; then she begins to follow the recipe. Except that Judy, being Judy, makes one little mistake. Instead of adding one *packet* of yeast to the mix as required, she adds the whole *carton* – *several* packets of yeast!

You can imagine what's going to happen. The dough's going to begin growing...and growing and growing. And the more Judy adds more flour, it's going to keep growing and growing. If she adds more water, it will keep growing. More salt, more oil – nothing's going to change it, is it? It's just going to keep on growing and growing. She can try cutting the mound of dough in half, pounding it, caressing it, covering it – with all that yeast it's going to keep growing and growing and growing.

Finally, in desperation, Judy goes out and buries the huge lump of dough in her front yard, comes back inside, and sits down in the living room to watch TV. Within an hour, her neighbor comes bursting through the front door, screaming: "There's something growing in your front yard!!!"

Any idea what comes next in the story?

The heat of the sun on that summer day starts beating down on that ill-fated mound of dough, that unbaked loaf, even though it's buried in the ground, and brings the yeast back to life! It starts growing again and BURSTS out of the ground! Even its grave couldn't contain it, so irresistible was the life of that yeast which Judy hid in her bread dough.

Yes – the kingdom of heaven IS like the yeast which a baker “hid” in three measures of flour. The life of the Kingdom, promised to all of us, has a life of its own, a life which we cannot destroy or even deter. This is life hidden within our lives together, and if we would only believe in it and embrace it, it would be fully ours. And it WILL invade our lives, each of our lives, some day, and fill us with possibilities which we don’t even dare to imagine for ourselves right now.

“Do you not know the joy you will find in embracing that life?” Jesus asks his disciples. “Why, it is as if you found a treasure hidden in a field, which you have just discovered and which you know to be so great a treasure that if you only had it, all that you ever dreamed of could be yours. And so, gladly, you run (don’t walk) to the nearest real estate agent and buy that field, spending everything you have ever earned in your life for the possibility of having that treasure.”

And he goes on from there to explore the next question he knew they’d ask: “Did you ever wonder how much you would have to do to be prepared to receive such a life?” Have you ever thought that if you were ever to “qualify” to receive such a life, such a treasure, such promise, such joy, you would surely need to be standing on the right corner, at the right time, with the right people, doing the right things when this Kingdom came your way?

And then Jesus throws in the kicker: “NO WAY!” he tells them. This same Kingdom of Heaven isn’t like something you earn. It’s like a net, which is thrown over all of us at once, and we are drawn together, pulled, despite our better judgment, into the lap of our loving God, who will, in God’s own way and time, lift us up out of the tangled web of life to receive the fullness of life everlasting, the life promised to us all.

Can you begin to get excited about what Jesus is promising us here?

Can we allow ourselves to believe that each of us might have that life, filled with such promise, such joy, such confidence, such power, such possibility? “Boy, I hope so.” says Jesus. “But just in case you don’t get it yet, let me tell you another parable ...” And so he continues – until finally, finally, we get the point.