

When I was a kid, and my eyesight was still pretty good, my parents gave me a shiny new red Tasco microscope. It came in a styrofoam case with pockets carved out for the parts and accessories and little samples you could examine. I was enthralled, and as one does with every new tool, or toy, naturally I started looking at everything I could. Ordinary things like salt became extraordinary when you could get a good look at them, but the best thing to look at, of course, was... pond water. What seemed to be calm and boring and easily overlooked turned out to be teeming with life, and if just a few drops could hold wonders, what of the whole pond? What of the river, the oceans, the world? One instrument can teach us that the world is far richer, more complex, and more beautiful than we could ever observe on our own, by giving us a tiny glimpse of a tiny part of that world.

But suppose you were trying to teach a similar lesson before there were microscopes, and before there was anything we would call science. Suppose you were teaching about something that's invisible anyway, no matter how well you can see. Jesus had his work cut out for him. In the previous chapter, the Pharisees had just decided he was a threat and began plotting his death. Then his mother and brothers showed up, perhaps to take him home for his own good. How on Earth was Jesus going to get his message out, get it out in a positive way that did justice to the reality of a spiritual world teeming with life and beauty, bursting with unimaginable possibilities? How could he get people to grasp, or even consider, what God was doing, or what God wanted for the world? How was Jesus going to reach the ordinary people he knew and loved so much, people who were poorly educated by the standards of *that* time, let alone ours, people whose difficult lives would make them skeptical of a message of blessing, whose weary, monotonous lives would make them skeptical of a message of transformation?

He had to use similes, and lots of them, to get at different aspects of God's Kingdom, and he had to trust that although the people were not well educated, they weren't stupid, either. So he reached them by talking about familiar things in surprising ways. They would have been familiar with the tiny mustard seed. If you pointed out that the ratio between the size of the seed and the size of the full grown plant is impressive, they likely would have readily agreed. But to say that the plant becomes so great that birds can nest in it would have been endearingly goofy. You can imagine the people starting to smile, but also becoming intrigued. And in that way, the kingdom of God began to grow in them.

Using what people knew well, Jesus taught about things no one knew. Using what they could see, Jesus taught them to see the invisible: life, growth, surprise, hope, and the beauty of wisdom. He showed them God is already in the world, doing amazing things, quietly. God's blessed transformation of the world is hidden life, hidden treasure. And what if that life, that treasure, is already within us, too?

All the things Jesus described, seed, leaven, treasure, fish, all are close, but

hiding somehow; all are good things to have. But one of these is not like the others. We might fairly ask, treasure? Really? I thought Jesus was anti-treasure. What's the use of a pearl, especially if you have to give up everything else you own in order to get it?

OK, yes, of course he wasn't speaking about a literal pearl. I think that choice of that particular image raises two points. One is that if you're going to be trading precious jewels, you really need to know what you're looking for. There's a bit of circularity here, which is clearer in the story of Solomon. Solomon asked God to give him wisdom, but to desire wisdom above all else, you have to have a bit of wisdom already. But coming as it does after the similes of the mustard seed and the leaven, we may hope that God will give us the spiritual growth to recognize, and desire, wisdom.

The other point is that pearls are valuable not because they sustain life or produce value, but because people desire them. And you can tell a lot about someone based on what they value, and especially, what they are willing to make sacrifices for. Once again, we should make the connection with the deep tradition of sacred wisdom, a tradition that was ancient even in Jesus's day. Scripture described wisdom as the most desirable treasure, for wisdom is a way for us to encounter God, a way for God to dwell within us, and there, to nourish us and give us growth.

And so despite their poverty, and lack of formal education Jesus's original audience would have had a leg up on us. Being more familiar with the ancient wisdom tradition, they would have caught the subtleties of his message on their own, but we need research and explication. The world distracts our hearts and weakens our vision of holiness. For example, we might be tempted to read our very worst impulses into the parable of the separation of the fish, identifying ourselves, of course, as the good fish, and whoever we don't like as the bad. But of course, that would be putting ourselves in the place of God, and also missing the point. I think that parable was meant to promise not the literal death of individuals, but the liberation of a community from oppression and all forms of evil. I think it is a parabolic reminder of what St. Paul taught plainly: nothing can separate us from the love, the wisdom, the treasure of God. Jesus and his Church know the remedy to the world's ills.

We welcome and nourish the wisdom of God through worship and prayer, faithful struggle and humble charity, discipleship, the practice of the Christian life. As God's wisdom grows within us, like a tool, but a living tool, a new organ, so too will grow our capacity to recognize godliness in the visible world and the image of God hidden in other souls — in some souls, quite well hidden indeed! But God can see this treasure within us. God doesn't need a microscope, because God put the divine image within us.

Therefore we are more precious to God than any material treasure, and we should likewise treasure one another. And like a seed, or yeast, God's wisdom and love are not just precious but active; they enlarge our hearts, focus our wills, make us more gracious, and clarify the world. If we allow them to grow in us and transform us, no one will need a microscope to see this divine beauty. We will be the fulfillment of Jesus's

prophetic similes. The grace and glory of God shall be revealed as we bring divine wisdom into the world through joyful proclamation and transformative practice. The result will be a sight so beautiful that even weak eyes, sinful hearts, and simple minds will recognize, understand, and rejoice what God is doing, all around us, and within us.