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Title: Surprises by the Seashore

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Romans 8:26-39](#)

Text: [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



I have to apologize. I should do it more often. I know that listening to preaching is a burden. Some of you get that turned around. Throughout the years, supportive members have said, "Randy, I know that preaching is a burden. It must be hard to write a sermon each week. The assignment must weigh heavily...such a burden."

Actually, the burden is on you. I know this and apologize for the weight. Each week you have to suffer through 20 minutes, trying to figure out not just what I'm saying, but what I'm saying about what God is saying. Now there is a heavy weight.

Thrown into this heavy burden of listening is the form of the sermon. You'd think we might be a little more predictable. But sermons don't always follow the same path of logic because there are different types of scripture. There are different forms for different passages and, poor you. You don't know when you show up for worship, what form you are going to get. But it is human nature to want a familiar form so that you know exactly what's going on.

For instance, if I were to start, "once upon a time" you would know what is coming. A fairy tale because you know the form. Or, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today." Who is getting married? "May it please the court." Who's on trial? "For your safety and comfort, please direct your attention to the flight attendants." Where are we going? You know how to listen when the form is familiar and it begins in a predictable way.¹

But when the form changes, it can throw you for a loop. It's not just you, it's everyone. Plato, writing in the Republic centuries ago, said it is very distressing and disturbing to a society if you change the modes of music and speech. It's disconcerting. If you want to disorient your listeners, change the pattern of speech.² We see some of this in our society today, adding to the disorientation we are experiencing. Words, names, and places once right,

now not. New words, phrases, language changing. Plato was right, nearly 2 ½ millennia ago. Changing the form places a burden on the hearer.

I doubt if Jesus read the Republic. It's not totally out of the question but a stretch. If he had, he might have known better. He changes the form of his teaching, not once but twice, not over time but on the same day. Those who were listening to him appreciated his first form. It was straight forward, to the point, a blessing. You see it best in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6) They got that. I get it. You get it. It's easy to understand. Those who are hungry and thirsty for God will be filled. It's a gem and there are lots of gems in that Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. You are the salt of the earth; the light of the world. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

You could spend a lifetime studying just that sermon; some have. Then Jesus changes his form. Matthew says it was because of the conflict that he had with religious authorities over healing. He starts teaching in parables.

He did it by the seashore, near Capernaum. He was socially distant but not because of a disease. The crowd was too big so he got in a boat, pushed off from the shoreline and taught, not in straight forward statements, but in parables. He begins with two agricultural parables about the kingdom of heaven. "A sower went out to sow," (Matthew 13:3b) he said. And then, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed..." (Matthew 13:24b) Parables describing the kingdom of heaven, rather than straightforward statements. It's a new form and as such, a burden.

A new form of preaching will always confuse. The confused the disciples, ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables? You do know this is hard for us to understand? We like your old sermons. What happened to "blessed are the peacemakers" or "don't worry about tomorrow?"

Jesus said, "Look, I had to shake things up. People think they know everything about God and how God works. I'm trying to get them to see what's going on. I'm trying to break up the hard ground of their wrong-headed expectations so the seed of the Gospel can take root, hence the parables about sowing, extravagant stories about God.³ God sowing seeds of love indiscriminately and God being patient, allowing the weeds and the wheat to grow together."

Okay, now we get it, it's your new form. Jesus, tell us another story, another parable. Maybe they were hoping for a story about a man with two sons. That's a good parable. Or maybe the one about the fellow who was traveling to Jericho. I like that one. Both of those fit the new form. According to Matthew, Jesus tells them five more parables. But the form isn't the same. Jesus changes it again, turning the parables into to similes: five rapid-fire similes, back to back to back. Like a quiz at school, Jesus says mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a fine pearl, and a fishing net. What do these five things have in common? Do you know? The kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like these things. What? Talk about a burden.

I can just hear the disciples. Jesus, we were just getting used to the form of a parable and now you tell us that these are a parable? "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field" (Matthew 13:31b) Really?

"Yes, like a mustard seed. It starts small, the tiniest seed. Just a little thing can make a big difference. Initial size doesn't determine the size of the outcome. Think big like a mustard tree."

Well, Jesus, it's not the smallest seed out there and it's certainly not the biggest tree, maybe 10 feet at best."

"Oh come on. It's there, hidden but it's going to be big, surprisingly big! Little things can have big results. Imagine the kingdom of heaven like a mustard seed.

Okay, but "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Matthew 13:33) Jesus, three measures of flour? That's a bushel of flour, sixty pounds. It'd make 90 pounds of bread. Do you know how long that would take?

Yep. That's the kingdom of heaven. It takes time. You have to nurture it. But it's sneaky, eventually, it grows, slowly but surely. And just wait until you taste it, you'll see that the Lord is good. (Psalm 34: 8) You'll never go back to matza; it's surprisingly good.

What about the treasure? "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid." (Matthew 13:44)

That's right. You've got to dig for it. Hunt for it. It's there. You know people bury things all over the place. What a surprise when you find something. But

do it right. Taking possession of the kingdom requires the right behavior. Make it yours because you can't cut corners.

Okay, I think we've are onto something. But what is this about the pearl.

Well, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls." (Matthew 13:45) It's his life pursuit and when he finds it, the biggest, most valuable pearl ever, the mother of all pearls--not mother of pearl, which is something else---this surprising, gigantic pearl, he invests everything he has in it. How could he respond any other way? It's what he has spent his life seeking. That's commitment. That's sacrifice and hard work, kingdom living. Get it?

It's like the fishing net. You liked that one didn't you? It's a lot like Weeds and Wheat, don't you think? "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind." (Matthew 13:47) I mean every kind. I know, I know. Observant Jews only consume those fish with both scales and fins. But this net also pulls lobster, crabs, scallops, clams, shrimp, even a catfish or two which is surprising coming out of this lake. I know those bottom-feeding "fish" aren't kosher are simply thrown back into the sea. But just like my "wheat and the weeds," they were gathered up together, without any worry about credential. You can't sort them in advance so don't worry about it. It's not your job anyway. It's God's job. In the end, God will take an accounting.

Do you now understand what a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, fine pearl, and a fishing net have in common? Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." (Matthew 13:51)

Do you believe them? I don't. I don't think they really understood.

Do you remember sitting in a class in school when the teacher taught something new, something complicated, something a little confusing, and then asked everyone, do you understand? And every student in the room nodded their head "yes" and you just went along with the crowd, because if everyone understands, you should too. So you nod and say yes too, but actually, no one understood. I don't think they really understood. They had the burden of learning something new while at the same time, the burden of a new form of teaching. What a burden?

But of course, that wasn't what Jesus was trying to accomplish. He didn't want to be a burden at all. Rather, he wanted them to begin to experience the kingdom of heaven in a very different way, not as something out there in the future, but something right here and now. Something surprising,

something organic that starts small and grows large, something mysterious that gives rise to something beautiful and nourishing, something valuable that is worth searching for, something rare that is incredible when found and something inclusive, pulling in all kinds of people, good and bad alike, Gentile and Jew alike.

Growing, nourishing, valuable, rare, inclusive. He could have used that list. What do things have in common? Growing, nourishing, valuable, rare, inclusive—the kingdom of heaven. Instead, he used mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, pearl, fishing net to show what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Jesus' parables, all of them, whether they take the form of a story about a sower or are little similitudes offered back to back, Jesus' parables are all about embracing God's continual presence in this world. God is at work, even though our human eyes often fail to perceive what is happening. That was powerful news in the first century and good news for today. Even though we can't see it in all that we are witnessing around us right now, God is still at work, growing, nourishing, creating a valuable, rare, and inclusive world.

I need that hope, that reminder that God is still here, with us, in all that we are going through and though it may be tiny, slow rising, something valuable, rare and inclusive is going to be discovered. I believe this even on the days when the news is darkest. God is doing something in our midst. There is a reason for hope.

This is the reason. The "Kingdom of heaven" is Jesus' password for telling all people what God wants to do for us. The "Kingdom of heaven" is the gift of divine blessing and love that God wants to give to us. God wanted to give it to us so much that God sent His son Jesus to be the ultimate deliverer person of this special message. But of course, he wasn't just the bearer of the message. He is himself that Message. God loves us so much that he allowed his Special Delivery Messenger, his only Son, to pay the ultimate price for the message of this love and forgiveness to be delivered to us. ⁴ He did it by taking on your burden and mine, the heavyweight sin. Such a burden, such a weight.

Have you understood all this? If you say yes, then you should feel burdened no more.

¹ Craddock, Fred B.. Craddock on the Craft of Preaching (p. 99). Chalice Press. Kindle Edition.

² Craddock, (p. 100).

³ Somerville, Jim. The Reckless Sower. A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 6A Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 @ asermonforeverysunday.com,

⁴ Sweet, Leonard. How Does Your Garden Grow? Retrieved by subscription at sermons.com