

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

If you're anything like me then your attention span is shorter online than in person, so fair warning that this sermon is going to be longer than my target range for an online service. Go ahead and grab a coffee or tea refill and don't blame me, blame Jesus – he's the one that told a bunch of parables back to back.

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So let's begin with yesterday, July 25, being the feast of James the Apostle, also known as James the Greater. He is the patron saint of our parish and today we celebrate him.

He was known as James the Greater to distinguish him from both James the brother of the Lord, and the other Apostle James (known as the Lesser).

James and his brother John were the sons of Solome and Zebedee. They were Galilean fishermen, like their father, and scripture tells us that they were two of Jesus' first disciples.

As the story goes, one day as they were fishing, they were unable to catch anything and so were returning to shore. A man walking on the beach told them to dip their nets one more time, and when they did, they caught so many fish their boat almost sank.

That man was Jesus. He called for them to follow him and fish for people for God. And they did.

Along with Peter and John, James seems to have belonged to an especially privileged group whom Jesus chose to be witnesses to the Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter, and the agony in the garden.

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, James spread the Gospel for nearly 40 years across what is now Spain. When he returned to Jerusalem he was martyred by King Herod and was the first Apostle to die.

After his death his body was taken to Compostela, Spain to be buried. The Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James) is network of ancient pilgrim routes stretching across Europe and that come together at his tomb – and every year thousands of people still make spiritual pilgrimage and walk the Camino.

Three themes that reflect the life, ministry, and death of James are **incarnation, transformation, and abundance** – and they are also ways to approach today’s Gospel passage.

The kingdom of heaven is like...

Today we get a potpourri of parables about just what this kingdom is like – a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure which is arguably gained by shady means, a merchant in search of fine pearls, and a net which catches fish of every kind.

What in the world? What do these things have in common? Well, they are all things **of this world**, they are all **common**. In these parables, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is down to earth, literally.¹

As Christians, we believe in the **incarnation**, the mystery of God taking on humanity in the being of Jesus Christ. But in these parables Jesus puts that incarnational focus not on himself, but on the world around him.² The kingdom of heaven is like the most common things in human life.

¹ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 284.

² *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 284, 286.

Like Jesus himself, our everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of the divine and human. In this way God's realm is not some esoteric kingdom in the sweet by and by, but is instead envisioned in every nook and cranny of daily life, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.³ The parables call us to pay attention and put our minds, hands, and hearts to work in the world.

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Transformation is at the foundation of all these parables. In each telling, Jesus takes things that are subversive or corrupted and presents them as a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven is like – therefore giving them, and the understanding of God's realm, new meaning. Listen to the transformation found in each of these parables.

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In the ancient world mustard was a weed and it was not something you would ever plant a field of. However, its tiny, weightless seeds would often blend into sacks of grain undetected. When that grain was planted, low and behold, up would spring the mustard alongside. It's akin to last week's Gospel of the wheat and tares.

So the kingdom of heaven is like an unwanted weed? Perhaps. Or maybe the kingdom of heaven is something unexpected that comes and invades and overturns the nicely bounded rows we plant in our lives. It pushes us beyond our boundaries, forcing us to discern whether they are our boundaries or God's boundaries.⁴

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³ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 286.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 285, 287

When we think of yeast, most of us think of the stuff that comes in packets or jars at the store, but leaven in the time of Jesus was not so sterile, and was in fact considered unclean. The leaven of yesteryear was created by setting aside a portion of leftover bread to spoil and then be used as the starter for the next loaf.

If it was not spoiled enough, it was worthless, as the new bread would not rise; if left to spoil too long, it could cause food poisoning. Leaven could be fatal, but it could also be life-giving – it all depended upon the person preparing it.

We are told then, that the kingdom of heaven is like a pinch of leaven that a woman mixed together with three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

Prepared lovingly by one who pays attention, three measures of flour would have made enough bread to feed a wedding party – gathering people together in joy.

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On the surface saying the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure is fairly innocuous. However, when you think about the fact that someone found a treasure that was not theirs, buried it in a field, and then bought the field so it became theirs, it becomes more muddy.

But this parable, along with the one that directly follows it about the merchant who purchased the pearl of great value, point us away from the thief and the merchant themselves, and instead toward their actions.

In both cases heaven is likened to the valuable object, and we are told that they went and sold all they had to gain them. So it is that we, all of us, must be ready and willing to give things up things of value in this world in order to come close to the reign of God.

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For the second week in a row we get the weeping and gnashing of teeth. As New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine once remarked, it sounds like a trip to the dentist gone horribly wrong.

But if you look closely you'll notice the eschatological sorting of the good and bad itself is not what is compared to the kingdom of heaven. No, the kingdom of heaven is the net cast wide enough that caught fish of every kind.

To come close to the kingdom we too must be willing to cast the wide net. It is not our job to sort – that we are told is the work of angels. But to make the kingdom of God present, we must welcome all into our midst and be ready to be transformed by their presence.

This is really what all these parables are about – not just transforming the suspect images of mustard seed, leaven, someone who gains ill-gotten treasure, a merchant searching for pearls, or a net and catch of fish. No, these parables are instead an invitation into transforming our lives so that we make known and live into the kingdom of God.

It happened when a Galilean fisherman named James dropped his nets and followed the one who was the Christ.

It happens when God's grace disturbs the orderly garden of our lives, when we have the courage to use the leaven, when we turn our hearts to God and away from the treasures of the world, when we confront barriers to inclusion within our hearts and our communities.

And it happens when as individuals, and as a community, we live lives of **abundance**.

The world around us operates on scarcity – the idea that there is never enough – enough money, enough power, enough stuff, enough time, enough beauty, enough anything.

The kingdom of heaven – here and now – operates on abundance and radical generosity. All things come from God, and when we unreservedly share what we have and who we are – we partake in the spreading of God's kingdom.

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James walked alongside the incarnate Jesus, he witnessed Jesus' transformation both on the mountaintop and through his resurrection, and he lived God's abundant love, spreading the good news of God in Christ, until the day he died.

My prayer for this community on the day we celebrate the saint who's image we are called into, is that we, too, will witness and work make known the kingdom of heaven, here and now. Amen.