

“It’s Like This”  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52  
Lea P. Slaton

If I were to say to you that “he gave me a look like ice,” would you know what I meant? Would you be able to imagine a glare that could send cold shivers down your spine like ice? Or, what if I said – to use one of my dad’s favorite lines – “she was mad as an old wet hen.” Could you imagine that? Have you ever been as mad as an old wet hen? Have you ever seen anybody as mad as an old wet hen? I can use that phrase and something comes to your mind. That is the beauty of this grammatical goody in our language called a simile. Your high school English teacher probably drilled into your high-school head that a simile compares two things that are not alike using the words ‘like’ or ‘as.’ As big as the side of the house. Drinks like a fish. As cute as a button. A former co-worker used to get overwhelmed at work, and she’d say, “I can’t talk today. I’m backed up like a bad toilet.” Gotta love those similes!

Jesus used them whenever he had something difficult or glorious to describe, and let’s face it, whenever we try to describe God things, our language is limited. Who has the words to do justice to the glory of God, the grace of divine forgiveness, or the wonders of the Kingdom of Heaven? Jesus himself did not have the words, so he remembered high school English and invoked the DIVINE SIMILE! Sinners are LIKE lost sheep, the word of God is LIKE the seed sown in different kinds of dirt, God is LIKE a mother hen, the kingdom of heaven is LIKE a wedding feast. Jesus said it over and over again, it’s like this, telling his listeners that God stuff is LIKE brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and weeds, and from our scripture seeds and shrubs, pearls and merchants, women and bread, and finders of hidden treasure!

Stories like that capture our imagination – it’s the stuff movies are made of: parties, secret passageways and buried treasures. In 2009, the Antique Road Show came to Raleigh, and a woman showed up with four jade green knick knacks. Her father, a Kentucky farm boy, had been in the army in the 1930’s and he was stationed in China as some kind of liaison. He brought back these knick knacks – two bowls, a dragon, and a pitcher. Fast forward 70 years and his daughter has those knick knacks and that daughter takes them to the Antiques Road Show in Raleigh and her little jade collection is appraised at over one million dollars.

Immediately, we start to imagine what we might do if our father left us some old green knick knacks. And, that is perhaps what Jesus hoped – to spark our imagination about what we might do with precious gifts from our Father. Otherwise, he could have written a “Kingdom of Heaven for Dummies” book. *If you want to get to the Kingdom of Heaven then here is what to program in your GPS. Here are activities and worksheets.* It would suit practical people just fine if we could approach faith like a book study with assigned readings and fieldtrips and maybe even Mickey Efirid on a DVD, as it were. But, Jesus seemed to want his followers to have more than a good Christian education. He wanted us to have a Christian imagination – to be able to imagine a world where everything is coming up God. He tells us what Kingdom living is LIKE - which leaves a lot of room for imagination...which is why Christians have differences of opinion on how it looks and sounds and feels to live our faith.

Some Christians say it’s about what we DO. Others say it’s about what we DON’T do. Others say it’s about getting to heaven. Still others say, oh, it’s about getting along. And, Jesus? Well, he says, you know, it’s like a mustard seed, like yeast, like buried treasure, like a fine pearl, like a net cast into the sea. It’s like all these ordinary things that are already here, and

they take on the sparkle of God. It's like all these things that seem to be tiny and insignificant and time goes by, and something starts to stir in the earth, someone wrestles the net out of the sea, someone starts to claw through the dirt for that buried treasure. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like – when what is nothing becomes a celebrated something. That ought to give us pause because is teaching about approach to mission and sharing God's love and church and being God's love, if we are going for a kingdom LIKE the ones Jesus describes.

As a boy, Fred Craddock says that he went to Christian youth camp and he heard about making a sacrifice for Jesus. He imagined BIG things and BIG sacrifices. Leaving his family to go on the mission field. Living in poverty to take care of the less fortunate. Stepping in front of a firing line for the honor of Christ. Our minds often go straight to the big things– solving world hunger, converting all of Johnston County, getting more people in here on Sundays than the Baptists! I suspect Jesus knew that we'd jump on the big bandwagons first because a mustard seed seems awfully small when we see so many things that need to be fixed – so much need – so much loneliness – so many injustices – it's discouraging, and we want a big word from Jesus.

As did those people who heard him the first go 'round. They, too, were discouraged. They were sick and tired of Roman government. They were overwhelmed with making a living and their responsibilities. They looked around and did not see peace. They saw poverty and hunger and illness right outside their front door. They needed big help. They did not have time to think about seeds, for crying out loud. They had bigger fish to fry. They began to doubt what God was doing in their world.

Just like us. Sometimes we wonder what God is doing in our world if anything. It is so easy to be discouraged when we look around us. We read reports on world hunger, and our minds can barely take it in: there are nations in our world where the life expectancy of a child is two years old. It puts our hectic efforts to get dinner on the table every night in perspective.

It's easy to be discouraged when we see the poverty in the lives of the people of our world, too. When we see pictures in magazines or on television. People living in cardboard shacks. Children playing in mud. When we were in Nashville for General Assembly, we saw a lot of homeless people camped out on benches. It was terribly discouraging.

It's easy to be discouraged when we read about a gunman opening fire on a youth camp in Norway for an hour and a half. It's easy to be discouraged when we read about young people with fame and fortune and unable to escape their demons. The big world has big problems.

But, even closer to home, it is easy to be discouraged when we drive to church and see the soccer fields full and the church parking lot empty, when few have interest in studying the great truths of our faith, when the TV is more compelling than God or Jesus. We could go on and on talking about the things which discourage – what IS God up to?

It's like this. It's like the leaven in dough –you can't see it in action, but God is kneading it and working it and it's there and it's here. Our part is to let God get his hands on his us – to squish us and push us until the kingdom starts to sprout up.

It's LIKE this. The manager of a hospital thrift shop in Angel's Camp, CA walked past the planter box outside the shop every morning. Every morning, she would look at those clumps of dirt and the dried up weeds and reprimand herself for not replanting. Then one morning when she arrived at the shop, the planter box was filled with the beautiful blooms of daffodils, tulips and pansies. There was a note leaning against the flowers. It read: "We hope you like your new garden. All we ask is that you commit some act of kindness for someone else." Later on, the manager found out that the garden was the gift of a local florist. The woman tended the garden and kept it looking beautiful. She also followed up on the request of the florist that she do

something kind for someone else. When a mother with four young children came into the thrift shop without enough money to buy clothes, the thrift shop manager gave them to her. It was a very small kind of garden. A garden in a planter box. A garden that grew beautiful flowers. But it also produced something more – clothes for children - blooms that no one could have predicted from the seeds buried in the dirt of that little box.

Yes, the world is a discouraging place. But, it is an amazing time to follow Jesus.

It is an amazing time to be a part of God's landscape. That's one way to think about church. We are like God's amazing yard service. We are like the amazing shrubbery. We are the little seeds that God has planted all over Johnston County, tiny little seeds of love. We are in this drab world with all of these problems and God plants us to add a little beauty here and a little color there and maybe a little texture in that corner. And, before you know it in God's time, huge shrubs are coming up with big blooms and birds are singing in our branches.

Look, and see: see those seeds bursting into shrubs all around you. It's like the hot meal delivered to a friend recovering from surgery. It's like the teen-ager with 5 grocery items who lets the woman with a cart full of food and 3 screaming children in front of him in line. It's like the man who goes out of his way to make sure his elderly neighbor has a working air conditioner. It's like the woman who prepares 120 snacks for VBS. Look, and see. You will see shrubs of love growing, maybe even right here. And, if you wanted to do more than look, if you wanted to add a little shrubbery to God's garden, we could do that, too, with nothing bigger than a mustard seed. My friend, Gay Walker, used to want to be more organized. And she said, "Before I go to bed, I've started asking myself, if I were a more productive person, what is one thing I would do before I go to sleep? I fold a load of clothes. I pay a bill." That one more thing, if she were more productive, turned into a lot of things. I wonder if before we go to bed, or when we wake up, or when we eat lunch, or when we are driving down the road, I wonder if we could ask ourselves, "If I were a bigger shrub, if I had even more love for Christ, what is one small thing I would do?" You might say thank you to God or to a person. You might make that phone call you've been putting off. You might make take some cookies to your new neighbor...you might start a mustard seed revolution. As you go along, you might run across things that make you mad as an old wet hen. You might feel dumber than a bag of hammers. Your calendar might get backed up like a bad toilet. It's like this. There is a garden. Planted by the good hand of God. – and the seed becomes a shrub and the shrub becomes a tree and the birds sing and all God's children say...