

A Treasure That Owns You

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Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

You only have to take 211 over the mountain to New Market to see it. Although it's not as profuse here as much as if you go further south. An estimated 7 million acres of land in the southeast are infested with it. A quarter of a million acres of that is in Alabama alone. I'm talking about kudzu, of course. We've probably all seen it, and we might know a little bit of its history. Did you know that in the late 19th century, kudzu was used as an ornamental vine to shade porches and courtyards of southern homes? It was prized for the grape-like fragrance of its flowers. And in the early 20th century it was promoted as an inexpensive forage for livestock. But, it really reached the height of its prominence in the 1930s when the CCC was charged with reducing soil erosion in the South. About 85 million kudzu seedlings were given to southern landowners at that time, and the government offered up to \$8 per acre as an incentive for farmers to plant their land in kudzu. In the 1940s there were kudzu clubs, kudzu festivals held and kudzu queens crowned. By the early 1950s kudzu was thought to be a nuisance. It, of course, spread rapidly and took over everything. In 1953, the USDA removed it from the list of cover plants permissible under the Agricultural Conservation Program. In 1970, they listed kudzu as a common weed in the South. In 1997, Congress placed it on the Federal Noxious Weed list. Did you know that there's a Federal Noxious Weed list? Me neither. But, there is and kudzu is on it. But, given its history it's safe to say, we never really know, do we.

I think if Jesus had been telling his parables today in the southeast U.S., he would have had this parable be about kudzu. You see, mustard was then, as it is now, a weed. The Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder, who died in 79 AD, wrote of mustard: it grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted. But on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once. For this parable, Jesus chooses a seed that when easily germinated takes over where it is not wanted, that quickly gets out of control and that attracts birds into a cultivated area, where they are least desired. Sounds a lot like kudzu! And besides that, too often we miss the fact that he tells this parable right on the heels of the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

So, first you have a parable about an enemy sowing weeds in among the wheat crop, and Jesus counseling not to be quick to judge and act against what is thought to be weeds, but to patiently wait to see what God does at the harvest. And then immediately following you have a parable about someone who intentionally plants a prolific weed in his own field because it becomes a shrub big enough for birds to nest in. The Kingdom of heaven is like a kudzu seedling that someone took and sowed in his field and it grew and spread and took over the whole field, and his neighbor's field as well, and the deer came and grazed on it. Try going into Alabama with that parable and see how well you are received.

People then and people now know a weed that takes over from a plant that actually provides something for the enjoyment of life. People aren't usually too open to looking for God in places, persons or things they know to be a nuisance at best. And the next parable would have given the same offense, the one about a woman taking yeast and putting it in all the four. Jesus' audience would have thought of leaven as unclean and corrupting. The Bible told them so, since the scriptures often used "unleavened" as a metaphor for the Holy. Leaven was a symbol of moral corruption, like the rotten apple in the barrel. And yet, Jesus chooses that, flour with yeast all through it, to speak of the Kingdom of God.

William Jennings Bryan, the congressman from Illinois and three time Democratic nominee for President, spent the last years of his life as a spokesman for the religious movement known as fundamentalism. And so, in 1925 he was the associate prosecutor in the trial of the school

teacher, John Scopes. Scopes, of course had taught the theory of evolution to his students in defiance of a state law prohibiting the teaching of doctrine contrary to the Bible. The defense attorney was Clarence Darrow. Well, Bryan won what became known as “the Monkey Trial,” and Scopes was fined. But, Clarence Darrow's merciless cross-examination humiliated Bryan and dealt a fierce blow to fundamentalism. In fact, some say that the trial broke Bryan's heart. Within a few days after it ended, William Jennings Bryan died.

In the play, “Inherit the Wind,” which is a dramatic account of that trial, the character representing reporter H.L. Mencken, when hearing of Bryan's death, says to Clarence Darrow, “Why should we weep for him?” “You know what he was – a Barnum-bunkum Bible-beating blowhard.” But, in reply to an agnostic Mencken, Clarence Darrow says of Bryan, “A giant once lived in that body. But the man got lost – lost because he was looking for God too high up and too far away.”

I think according to these parables of Jesus, that's what we all tend to do, and maybe why we all tend to get lost. We look for God too high up and too far away. Says Jesus, the Kingdom of God is like a kudzu seedling, or like “unholy leaven” a woman puts in all the flour. Don't look too high up...look in what you think of as noxious weeds, look in what you think of as “unholy.” Don't look too far away, look close at hand kudzu, leaven in bread, treasure in a field. God comes to us as “weeds” that provide shade for birds' nests, or temporary forage for the deer, in a field that for the treasure found there “owns” us.

See, the key word in that parable of the person who finds treasure buried in a field, and maybe the key word for understanding all these parables, is joy. “In his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Given the similarities between mustard and kudzu, I think Jesus, when he told all these parables, had a twinkle in his eye. It's almost as if he's delivering one-liners! And one thing Jesus is trying to tell us about the kingdom, about God's presence in our lives, is that no one has to tell us to sell everything to buy the field, or the pearl. We can't help ourselves! He's saying that the Kingdom, when you find it, when you experience it, you find that it owns you, not the other way around. In fact, if all you see is a nuisance, noxious, useless weed, then you haven't entered the Kingdom. If you can turn back, if you can walk away from the field with that treasure in it unchanged, then what you've found isn't the kingdom. Because, it owns *you* and it *changes* the way you see. Dianne Bergant says the Kingdom is “the realization of knowing that we belong to God, that we are cherished and cared for, that we have been called to commit ourselves to the noblest values of the human heart.” If you can walk away unchanged in mind, unchanged in the way you see, then what you've found is not the Kingdom.

Each day, three days a week, I sat about a third the way up in that auditorium at Bethany College. It was my first semester of college and up there near Wheeling W.Va. I was far, far away from anywhere that felt like home. My high school girlfriend had broken up with me, and though I once thought I did, I no longer knew what I wanted to major in, or what I wanted to do. And certainly ministry had never entered my mind. But, somehow I ended up in an Intro to the Bible class and so every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at 11:00, I would go and sit in that auditorium and listen to Dr. Hiram Lester re-tell the stories of the Old Testament. I know now that he was preaching, really, and what a preacher he was. And sometime about half-way through the semester I realized that home had found me. And although I still would leave Bethany College, and although I still wanted nothing to do with the parish ministry, I knew I would never walk away from what had found me there. It was worth everything. Not too high up, not too far away, in a place I couldn't wait to leave behind forever.

Last Friday a week ago was our last morning at Project Crossroads. I was driving a van full of kids that morning out to the work site in Groseclose. That's when it happened. I have no way to explain it, so I'll just tell you what it was like. Music was playing on the CD player, I don't

remember what, but whatever it was, it was part of it. It happened just as we were going by a farm. The hay bales spotted the hillside up to my right. But, all of a sudden from that point for about the next minute, it all felt eternal. It was like a euphoric state. Everything was shining with God, and we were all one in it, the creation around, the music, the kids in the van, farmers in the field, the work we were going to do. It was all filled with God. In a van full of kids on a country road, going to shingle a house in southwest Virginia, it happened. And, I don't even know what it was, but I think it was a glimpse of the Kingdom.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his *joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” God comes as “weeds” that provide shade enough for birds to nest in, in a field that “owns” *us*. That's enough, isn't it, when we've experienced that? It's enough to lead us on, “weeds” that we are, that even we the church can provide shade enough for those who need it, that even through us God can reveal the treasure worth risking everything for... the treasure that they will not be able to walk away from. May it be so.

Amen.