

Multiple Choice

It has been quite a few years, but I still remember taking tests where the questions were presented in a multiple choice format. There would be several possible answers with a circle or box beside them. You knew that one of the answers was the correct one. The test was to know which answer was the correct one—except just to make it interesting often there was a choice that said all of the above or none of the above. Sometimes the individual answers would contradict each other; sometimes the answers would say the same thing with a minor alteration so although they looked different, they really weren't. In the passages we have been considering in Matthew's gospel we have now encountered six different parables; each one beginning with the metaphor "the kingdom of heaven" is like....and then the description of examples based on daily experiences of the crowd which seem mostly unrelated examples. A test asking about the kingdom of heaven based on Matthew chapter 13 could look like this: The kingdom of heaven is like: A. A field of good plants and noxious weeds. B. A mustard seed. C. Yeast. D. Buried Treasure. E. Fine pearls. F. A net full of fish some edible, some not. Or G. All of the above. Since Jesus is the one telling these parables, it seems that the only correct choice we have is to assume option G. is the correct answer. To make the test more interesting, within the first parable about that farmer who sowed his seed so recklessly we have an interjection by Jesus that tells the disciples why he uses parables for his teachings. They are a type of litmus test as to who is able to really discern what he is saying and respond correctly to the current and coming rule of God, and informing those who are listening that many will not. At the end of today's passage Jesus basically asks his disciples to raise their hands if they understood his teachings. Their unanimous answer was "yes." Coming events described in the lives of those disciples seems to indicate their understanding might not have been as complete as they thought; their assent might have been a little premature. Do we also do this, saying to ourselves, of course the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. I see that. Yes, now I see, a pearl of great price is just how I see the kingdom of heaven and every time I bake a loaf of bread, I see how obvious it is that yeast is just like the kingdom of heaven. The images are crystal clear---right? Do we really even understand what element of these things Jesus is trying to show as describing the kingdom of heaven? Those of us who have used mustard seeds in recipes may have a better understanding of the size of the seed than those who have only seen it enclosed in a piece of glass used as a necklace pendant, but who among us really can appreciate the size to which a mustard plant might grow in the wild landscape of Palestine? In today's world where everything is purchased already prepared, do we appreciate the effect of a small amount of yeast that is added to the flour mix? From the context we can extrapolate that Jesus is saying that something small can grow and then have an outcome that you would not expect from the size of the initial item. These two parables tie in closely to their location within the parable of the wheat and the tare. The location of the kingdom of heaven is here and now—that field with the mixed crop is our world. If the kingdom of heaven is here and now, the rule and reign of God is right here and now then what does the mustard seed tell us about this world we live in? One of the things about the mustard plants in the area where Jesus spoke which when we read this parable we have no knowledge about was that it was a ubiquitous problem—the seeds were tiny and wind scattered and would they infest a field planted for

harvest taking over the entire field. No one in Jesus' time wanted mustard seed anywhere near their fields. So adding this to the size of the seed, what could we say about the kingdom of heaven? It is tiny and its presence is easily overlooked, hidden away in the soil, but eventually it will invasively explode and be visible to all. The mustard plant grows to be a large shrub, not a tree, but it still can provide nesting and shelter to the birds of the area. Jill Duffield in her commentary on these parables this week translated the parable into what she felt was a metaphor of more familiar terms. She wrote: "Perhaps I might say that the kingdom of heaven is like a computer virus: unknown until it blows up your hard drive and your day-to-day routines are upended as a result." That image certainly comes closer to expressing the dread those depending upon the harvest from their field might have felt at the thought that mustard might invade it. Let's leave that parable and go on to the one about the yeast that the woman mixed in with her three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. While this image for us brings to mind fresh homemade loaves of bread, that is not likely what the crowd pictured. Yeast to them would have been seen as more a contaminant—an impurity—something that would have ruined their bread—their unleavened bread. Duffield sees the yeast metaphor as being like an antibiotic: silent and unseen but active, and life-saving; even history-altering. The question is still for us to discern, like the disciples, what truth about the heavenly kingdom is Jesus revealing. The answer may be multifaceted. These two parables emphasize God's presence and power at work in the world even when people fail to notice it. At some points in time the presence and power of God will become unmistakable; it will not remain invisible forever. These two parables have a small degree of continuation from the parable of the wheat and the tare as all refer to the kingdom of heaven as being here and now, somewhat invisible but present. But what about the hidden treasure and the hidden pearl? What do they have to offer by way of understanding God's kingdom among us? Again the treasure which is hidden is something small found within the larger field but owning that one field is worth all that he has accumulated elsewhere; the man searching for fine pearls finds one that is of such value that it is worth all of his other possessions combined. The treasure and the fine pearl represent the value of the proclamation of Jesus. The good news of the kingdom which Jesus proclaims and lives is truly good news only to those who are not fully and finally satisfied with what this life has to offer. For those who are content, selling everything to possess a single pearl, no matter how valuable would seem foolish, perhaps crazy. This is also true of the one who reduces all that he has to one field with a hidden treasure. What could be so precious as to give up everything to possess it? And not only that, but find in the possession of it, joy. But if you think about the proclamations of the world around us which dominates the media, the retail world, the internet, etc.—how much joy do you see these things bring? How satisfied are those who pursue the status quo, those who have only what they have been able to secure on their own with the values, stereotypes, or prejudices of the culture which surround. The point of these two analogies is as much on the response to the great discovery or find as it is on the treasure or pearl. When we happen upon the presence of God or search and find God, we give up anything and everything for the sake of that relationship. Nothing is or can be more precious or valuable to us than participating in the kingdom of heaven that has been revealed to us, whether we were looking for it or not. C.S. Lewis once wrote that for us looking for God is rather like a mouse looking for a cat, because God will take control. In some ways, those first two parables are somewhat threatening—or perhaps they are sounding a warning. Being

drawn into kingdom life—participating in life as God desires us to live—can happen in unexpected ways. It can be unnerving, world-changing, risky as it calls us to look at all those around us differently. It can and should be transformative—when we truly don't like to be changed. We prefer our comfort zones of judgments made about others to the call to love without counting the cost. While Jesus' gospel is disruptive and even upsetting as we are called to leave behind our prejudices, nevertheless it feels true, real, and something worth buying at any cost. The last parable of the net which has captured all the fish, both good and bad, reminds us that God calls us all to come—the good, the bad and the ugly. The catch in the net is not our concern. If we are blessed to recognize the present and coming kingdom of heaven, then our role is not to separate the fish, but is to be all in with our whole selves to living the kingdom life of love. While eventually the contents of the net God has cast will be sorted, there is no hurry, no urgency to eradicate the bad fish who may well have value that only God can see. These parable illustrate there is a great deal of variety in the kingdom of heaven. We don't have to worry about picking the correct answer as many paths lead to the right relationship with the one true God. We may discover God, we may look for God, we may get accidentally caught up in God's broad net; no matter, for we are still part of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom we can be certain is present and powerful and growing and sure to provide home and sustenance for more of creation than we can imagine. Even when we can't perceive or understand, we can trust and be on the lookout, so we can point its presence out to others and so we will be ready with a radical response to God's reign when it comes fully. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.