

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 24, 2011, Pentecost 6, dedicated to the children and youth of First Church and always to the glory of God!

“Six Simple Stories”

**Romans 8:26-39;
Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Its summertime, and films are hitting the theatres at a record pace. All across the land, people have been seeking respite from record temperatures in the darkened viewing rooms of neighborhood movie theatres. Everyone has their favorites. Some have said, *Midnight in Paris*, and *The Tree of Life* are great - don't miss - films. *Transformers* and *X-Men* have returned with a bang. *Thor* has come down from the heavens while *Captain America* has emerged from the laboratory to fight "Schmidt" - the Nazi menace. *Super-8* has captured the hearts of America set itself in Ohio in 1979, complete with an alien seeking to return home and young teens making homemade movies on super-8 disks. Steven Spielberg is back!

But the films can't stop rolling! There are Kung-Fu pandas, horrible bosses, penguins in New York, gorillas on double dates with zookeepers, aliens and cowboys arriving out west and animated cars, and hung-over friends, too.

The final battle at Hogwarts between Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter has opened. Replete with Death Eaters, the Order of the Phoenix and the sheer chaos of the final confrontation, there are visions of heaven as Harry Potter and his valiant Hogwarts' classmates and professor's battle evil in 3-D in scenes which will long be remembered. Some unlikely heroes emerge in the course of the battle. But it wouldn't be Harry Potter if magic did not prevail in story and film!

Stories abound about the meaning of life, the struggle between good and evil, and the multiple ways and means of saving humanity, the earth and the universe. The celluloid battles for the human soul and human sensibility have come at us full force this summer once again.

Meanwhile, we cannot escape the real world as news from Norway on Friday reports a 32-year-old man blowing-up a government building in Oslo and then going to a summer camp on nearby Utoya Island dressed as a police officer, gathering the Labor Party teens together and then opening fire, leaving more than 70 people dead. We now know the man who did this was affiliated with a right-leaning political party, posts on a fundamentalist Christian Web site and has clearly stated in a 1,500-page manifesto that multiculturalism and Muslims immigrating to Norway are dangerous influences to his people. For such hatred and violence to devastate this peaceful nation and people is devastating and sobering. It feels like fiction, but it is fact.

Into this flurry of storytelling, drama and pain steps Jesus. He comes to us with six simple stories about the meaning of kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a huge concept to grasp and hold. But with a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a pearl, a fish net and a homeowner's treasured gift, Jesus weaves a vision for God's Kingdom on Earth. It is a many-splendored vision that he holds up to the light - like a prism - and turns ever so slightly for the sun, our imagination and our mind's eye to behold. In the stories he tells us what he sees. He invites us to listen, to ponder, to

enjoy.

First, the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds. It is almost too small to see – yet the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Sown in the fields, it can grow into an herbal bush that is like a tree. Jesus offers a vision of God’s reign on earth starting from the smallest possible seed and growing beyond imagination. In this vision, hope, imagination and possibilities for goodness and God-ness explode. It is a fact of history that great things come from the smallest beginnings. A seed of an idea, a vision of something great, a response to evil by one woman or man - all these are part of the mustard seed story. William Wilberforce believed that slavery should end. He dedicated his life to ending Britain’s part in the slave trade. He did so and then turned his eyes to America. He sparked an abolitionist movement that eventually brought the end of the slave trade.

Out of a mustard seed great things come. What is the mustard seed you are conspiring (in God’s name and spirit) to plant? What is holding you back? The kingdom of God awaits you sowing and growing this seed!

Second, at a table, a baker woman adds a lump of leaven to the loaf. The bread grows and tastes so wonderful with this small leaven in the loaf. Jesus encourages his followers to be the leaven in the loaf. This transformational power of God to grow something tasty and sure is an image which may be lost in translation. Like the leaven, are the works of God’s kingdom unseen, drawing men and women to God’s love in ways we cannot imagine? Or are God’s works in this world plainly seen? As we look through the oven door and watch the bread rising, we see the effects of leaven on the loaf. We needn’t choose between the two. We only need to witness to God’s unseen and plainly seen works in this world.

The kind word spoken, the prayer softly lifted, the call to a friend gently made, the touch on a shoulder of a forsaken and saddened neighbor or fellow traveler - all of these are

leaven in the loaf of humanity. In Harry Potter, it is the tiny “resurrection stone” that becomes a pivotal point of hope in a moment when all seems lost. Perhaps we would be wise to remember the “rock of resurrection” in our lives every time we feel like all is lost. Christ himself is the leaven in the loaf of our lives.

*The stories continue in the third parable. **A man is working in a field and finds a treasure hidden there. He sells everything to buy that field and claim that treasure.*** Simply put, we go about our daily work, walking the same steps, sitting at the same desk, seeing the same people day in and day out. How many of us see the precious gifts all around us in our daily routines? How many of us are looking for something NOT WHERE WE ARE and fail to see what is right in front of us? The man in this story finds his treasure while going about his daily work. When you enter your workplace, your school, your neighborhood, your home, looks around you. Look under your feet as well. Since God is in every place and person, find the God spirit in the place where you are. Why make yourself miserable by pointing out what aren't there, the failings of the place and people, the disappointments and the disadvantages. What is beautiful? What is good? What is treasured in the place where you stand? There you will find the Kingdom of God. Invest in the place and people whom God has given you and you will find that there are untold riches there.

Wait . . . there is even more . . . more pearls of wisdom from the wisest one of all! **In the fourth parable, a merchant is seeking pearls of great value. He finds his perfect pearl. He sells everything he has a buys it.** This man is a seeker. He has been in search of the perfect jewel for a long time. Some of us who are seekers can really relate to this guy. While the man in the field accidentally discovers something of great value, this man is looking all the time, every day. Some of stumble upon discovery and we react in excited ways. On the other hand, some of us seek, search, shop, read, research, research some more, read some more

and really invest our whole being in discovery. We are students of the values in God's kingdom, which are everywhere to be discovered and revealed. Then one day, we come upon our greatest discovery - the truth of God's kingdom right before our eyes. With this discovery, our search is over. Happiness abides within us.

Jesus is telling us that the pearl merchant is like us. He finds God's valued kingdom right in front of him and he is finally satisfied. He is now rich beyond belief - or perhaps - rich because of belief. Satisfaction guaranteed. The kingdom of God is ALSO like this - allowing us to breathe deeply and joyfully. Take a deep breath. Look around you. Perhaps the pearl of faith is right in front of you. Seek no more. God's kingdom is right in front of you!

But wait . . . there is more! **Fifth, God's kingdom is like a net cast into the sea which gathers all kinds of things into it. Once full and on the shore, the sorting begins.** Sometimes when we go fishing with nets, we catch tailpipes from cars, fishing poles, all sorts of assorted items dumped into the sea - and of course all sorts of fish - some edible, some not. We are left to sort out what is edible, salvageable and what needs to be recycled or cast back into the sea. Clearing our nets is not always simple, but it is always necessary.

The nature of the dragnet which Jesus just described is that it is not discerning or discriminating. It draws all sorts of things from the water. For those with cats (not nets) we often say, "Look what the cat dragged in." As a child, our cat Jinxy was a "mouser." I could often tell when he had returned from hunting because of the distinctive scream coming from my mother in the kitchen. He would proudly bring in his mouse or shrew and drop it at my other's feet by the kitchen sink. Like the dragnet, Jinxy was particular. He just brought things (read living things which he had caught) into our home.

The church is sort of like a dragnet or a mouser. We

catch lots of fish and other interesting objects. But the church has a tendency to be either inclusive or exclusive. We either welcome all people on life's journey - as First Church prides itself in doing. Or as other churches do exclusivity rules - unless folks toe the line in lots of ways theologically and dogmatically - they are gone. Just like some fisher people sit on the beach and also toss all sorts of objects and fish back in the sea, so do some churches.

The irony of this parable is that in God's kingdom, God will do the sorting. For better or for worse, as often we attempt to sort out who is worthy, who is not, who is in and who is out; it is God who does the sorting. We learn from the parable to gather all who would come and not to judge or to separate. That is God's work. Our work is bringing in the nets.

Finally, when Jesus is done with the five parables, he asks the disciples if they understand. They all say, "Yes." Time and experience will tell us that some of them (in fact) don't understand. At least one out of 12, doesn't get it. So, Jesus gives them one last parable - **The householder who brings out his treasure - old and new - and lays it out on the table.**

In this final story, the shortest of all, Jesus says that folks need to bring whatever gifts they have as an offering to God. Wherever it is that you may be hiding the gifts God has given you, go find them, bring them out into the light of day and lay it out on the table - old or new! Share your gifts with others.

If you are scientist, bring this gift. If you are a nurse, bring this one! If you are a therapist, a doctor, a teacher, a professor, an attorney, accountant, auto mechanic, a business man or woman, an artist, a laborer, a jack of all trades - bring your gift. If you can sing or dance, act or paint, write or pray, teach or steward - bring your gift. Lay it out on the table. Let others see the gift you have and bring your gift. Share your

gift. Jesus doesn't want us to abandon our gifts - or leave them at the door. No! He wants us to bring them, lay them on the table. Use your gifts - to the glory of God! That is what Jesus is saying.

The six short stories are complete. The kingdom of God has been revealed a little bit more. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is within us - not far away at all.

In Romans 8, Paul says we are all wrapped up by the spirit of God. As Christ's followers, we have been given his gifts so that we can change the world. Nothing can stop the gifted people of Christ from being positive change agents in his name. So, what are we waiting for? Let us go out in the world and make a difference. Amen.

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