

What's 'Heaven' Without the Field to Find It In Matthew 13:31—33; 44—52

What if they didn't understand? I know, right there in Matthew 13:51, Jesus asks his followers whether or not they *do* understand—and I know how they answered '**Yes.**' But what if they didn't? I'm suspicious. What if they really didn't know what they said they knew? It's been known to happen. Miss Teen South Carolina. 2007. A live-broadcast. And here's this young, beautiful woman who will be asked a question: Apparently one fifth of Americans find it difficult to locate their own country on a map of the world... *Do you, Miss Teen South Carolina, understand why that might be? Take your time:*

"I personally believe that U.S. Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some, uh, people out there in our nation don't have maps and, uh, I believe that our education like such as in South Africa and, uh, the Iraq, everywhere like such as, and, I believe that they should, our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., uh, or, uh, should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future. For our children."

You see, it's been known to happen. Someone asks us a question and we're put on the spot. For God's sake, we're competing to become Miss Teen USA. And so we fake it. We feign understanding. And that's what I believe is happening with the disciples as Jesus launches a rapid-fire series of parables—all of which (by the way) employ the word 'like'—and then turns, face-to-face with each of them, and says, "***Have you understood all this?***"

It's like a mustard seed, like yeast, like treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl in the marketplace, like a net being hauled from the sea and bursting with fish. Are we getting this? Are we picking up what he's laying down? Should we answer honestly? Is it okay if we don't—*like* if we hesitate—*like* if we phone a friend—*like* if we ask *Google* for the right answer?

Now, here we are in this field—called out of our typical and insular sanctuaries—into this park—and what I need to say is NO ONE IS GOING TO QUIZ YOU. NO ONE IS GOING TO TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OR ANY FAITH. But what's essential, I suggest, is our mutual CURIOSITY. Aren't you curious about these folks from other churches who've gathered here on this green space? (I am.). And aren't you curious about how this alternative reality—this *Kingdom of Heaven*— might be both concealed and revealed—among us, between us, within us? (Again, I am.) And yet, if I were to name one thing or one dynamic that seems to inhibit that curiosity it would have to be an easy, formulaic answer.

In the Monty Python satire, *The Life of Brian*, some first century folk are searching desperately for a Messiah; and unfortunately they settle on this guy named Brian. Brian is not the Messiah and he knows it. But for some reason, the crowds are chasing him through the streets of Jerusalem; they're chasing him like the paparazzi would chase a rock star or a celebrity or a charismatic politician. And as Brian is finally cornered, and as the crowd waits with bated breath, he speaks to them. He says, "*Listen! You've got to learn to think for yourselves. You're all individuals.*" And then, with one voice, as if offering a liturgical response in church, they say, "*Yes, Yes, we're all individuals.*" You see, it's been known to happen. *Have we really understood this? This Crucified and Risen Jesus? This Kingdom of Heaven? Yes, yes, of course. It's so obvious. It's a no brainer. God is Love, right? Okay, got it. Does Jesus really need to ask? Does anyone really need to ask? How insulting to even ask!* And yet, when it comes to these parables and to this parabolic way of teaching, Jesus *does* ask. And my sense is that he asks because he wants to unsettle any answer that seems settled.

A friend of mine was teaching a philosophy class at Eastern Washington University; and among the assignments the students were asked to write an essay on *John Stuart Mill*. John Stuart Mill is a nineteenth century utilitarian philosopher; and one of the students in the class said he understood all that. He not only understood what the assignment was—he purportedly understood what John Stuart Mill meant when he wrote: *"Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness..."* Well, isn't that obvious? Except: this particular student so wanted to impress his instructor, he copied someone else's essay, and in a sly effort to conceal that plagiarism, he asked the Artificial Intelligence to occasionally substitute a synonym for the words he had tried to pass on as his own. In reading the paper, however, my friend noticed something strange. Every time the name, 'John Stuart Mill,' came up—and it came up very often—the A.I. had replaced the sir name 'Mill' with the term 'Factory.' Apparently, the subject of this essay was *John Stuart Factory*.

So, go figure. In the following parable, let's assume that Jesus isn't talking about the promotion of happiness or the reverse of happiness. Let's assume, in verse 44, he's talking about something ***"like treasure hidden in a field"***—like this field—***"which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*** Now, aren't you curious? Why does Jesus portray the man as re-burying the treasure? Why doesn't he just surreptitiously extract the treasure from the dirt and leave the field to fester? (Why don't we just shuffle off this mortal coil and meet Jesus in the clouds?). Well, you see, maybe the *Kingdom of Heaven's* not like that. Maybe it includes the field. And if it includes the field, it includes and involves everyone sitting here today and anyone we may become curious about tomorrow.

And, if anyone's curious, let's consider the possibility that this *'field'* reaches back to the people of the past. It's 587 BCE and the armies of Babylon are on the cusp of invading Jerusalem and sacking the temple. The prophet Jeremiah has been imprisoned by King Zedekiah, for saying that the king and the kingdom are about to fall. Seventy years of exile are imminent. Things look pretty bleak. The propaganda of a domineering 'Empire' is soon to prevail. And yet:

“Jeremiah said, ‘The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.’ Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself. Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord” [Jeremiah 32:6—8].

Now, the reason I bring up this passage may be far from obvious. Jeremiah, while in prison, does buy this field; and yet, when the Babylonians overrun the Kingdom of Judah, he never benefits from the property at all. So why buy it?

- Unless, you see, that field is more than just a real estate investment.
- Unless that field includes a vast coalition of mysterious, interpersonal relationships—of people we know and some we don't know, and some we'll never know.
- Unless that field includes both the children of God who make reservations at *Clinkerdaggers* as well as those children of God who browse the food pantry shelves for peanut butter.

Have you—HAVE WE—understood all this? Even if your answer is “*Yes...I'm a proud member of Shadle Park Presbyterian Church*”—or “*Yes... I've been with Lidgerwood for fifty years*”—or “*Yes... I'm committed to Emmanuel's renewal*”—or “*Yes...Northwood's my home church*”—even if those answers are your answers—sooner or later—we're going find ourselves back in a field like this one. Or maybe we're going to lose ourselves in a field like this one.

Listen: ***“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...”***