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Proper 12A*

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*Humble Beginnings  
Matthew 13: 31-33; 44-52*

An elderly gentleman had a problem hearing for a number of years. Finally, he went to the doctor who fitted him with a state-of-the-art hearing aid that restored his hearing to nearly 100%. A month later, the man came back for a checkup and the doctor said, "Your hearing is perfect. Your family must be really pleased you can hear again." The man replied, "Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to their conversations. I've already changed my will three times."

Some of Jesus' parables, especially ones we've a million times, like the story of the mustard seed, need to be heard with a new set of ears – 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. Jesus told these stories not just for a first century audience but for every congregation, every person who would hear them throughout all time. Jesus told them to entice, disturb, even jolt us into a new way of experiencing at the world. The key to understanding them is to listen to them with the right set of ears.

In today's gospel passage Jesus tells not one but *five* parables that describe the "kingdom of heaven." The reason his message is so radical is that his listeners, like many Christians today, think of heaven as the place where some old white guy with a long beard sits in judgment, and people are screened by St. Peter for either that life or one much much worse. But Jesus thought of heaven as what he called "*now and not yet.*" Yes, Jesus would come again, though not anywhere near as quickly as his disciples thought, but the real joy of heaven was in the day to day experiences of our lives, experiences that we can only have if we work hard to stay open to God's presence and action in our lives and in the world. So Jesus essentially gives us a set of road maps so that we can recognize these "God moments" in our lives – five examples of how we might encounter God like a mustard seed, or yeast, or treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, like a net thrown into the sea, and like so many other manifestations of the joy of recognizing God in the day to day moments of our lives. Jesus calls us simply to "listen to our lives" so we don't miss these experiences when they present themselves.

Take mustard seeds for example. There are some things we've learned because of technology that sheds new light on the parable of the seeds. Over the past years, geneticists have been studying the DNA of plants, animals and humans. Their findings are fascinating. Apparently, we humans share some of the DNA found in tomatoes and bananas and flowers. Think about the tomato plants in your garden. They instinctively know that their purpose is to grow and bear fruit that will feed others.

Science indicates that we're all pre-wired for growth. We are all programmed to be fruitful. Yes, human fruitfulness is very different from that of your tomato plants, but we share the same purpose when we feed and nourish each other.

There is another parable included in today's text that talks about growth. This one is about yeast. If you are a baker, you know the purpose and force of yeast. It makes the dough expand so that the finished product is not flat like a pancake, but a sumptuous, full-bodied, tasty loaf.

If we hear these parables and unpack their simple metaphors with new ears, we will discover that they are giving us important information about living together in community. If indeed we share the DNA with other parts of God's creation that are wired for growth, then we find in the image of the mustard seed a truth about what we – the church – have as our purpose.

We are here to feed one another and to be fruitful in our work of offering nourishment to those hungry for God's acceptance, forgiveness, and unconditional love. We are here to understand who God is for us, to be transformed just as yeast transforms the dough.

I love the story of the man who was visiting Pawley Island in South Carolina with his children. Not being a beach person, he wasn't sure how to entertain them for the afternoon so he thought he would take them fishing. He stopped into the local tackle and bait store to purchase some provisions. The store owner said, "Well, you can try fishing, but nothing's biting. What you really ought to do is come back in October. That's when the fish really begin to bite."

"Well, I've got to do something with the kids," the visitor replied.

Later that day, he spotted a man along the creek fly fishing – in salt water! He walked up to the man and said, "Hi there. Having any luck? Fellow at the tackle and bait told me it was a bad time of year; they're not biting much." "Yup, I know," said the man. "He told me to come back in October. That's when they bite." The guy continued to look straight out at the water and said, "But you know, I'm here now."

And so are we. We're not the audience Jesus told these parables to in first century Palestine. We're not the church of 50 years ago. We're the church – right here – right now – and God expects us to be doing our best to cast out our nets, draw in the lost, the awkward, the abused, the disenfranchised, all sorts of people from all walks of life. Then to feed them, learn from them, and grow with them into the life God has called us to.

Not only is that in our DNA, it's in every single one of our cells because we are created in the image of God.