

We live down the road from Chittenango so we may know of the Wizard of Oz story more than others, and the iconic characters, especially the scarecrow, tin man, and lion. Each accompanied Dorothy along the Yellow Brick Rd, through the field of poppies, seeking a personal treasure from the Wizard. Remember? The scarecrow thinks he needs a brain, the lion wants courage, and the tin man longs for a heart. They yearn for inner qualities in order to be more whole, to feel more authentically connected to others. They search for what seems hidden from them. We've seen the end of the movie so we know they find their treasures in surprising places.

If we look at the whole of Matthew's ch. 13, where today's gospel is located, we notice that Jesus is telling stories to the local people. I can imagine he's alternately a patient storyteller or a frustrated teacher whose students just aren't getting it. In fact in v. 9 he says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear," "Are you listening? Really listening?"...which prompts the disciples to ask "Why do you tell stories?" Jesus explains that, unlike the disciples, the average follower has had less instruction about the nature of the kingdom of heaven; therefore, they have fewer insights. This could lead them to turn off his words in frustration. Stories rooted in their daily experiences create readiness and nudges them toward an awakening so that insights and understandings flow freely.

So, ok, perhaps we're some of those people who are ready to be nudged toward a welcome insight—a brief a-ha moment—to have God blessed eyes and ears to experience even a corner of God's kingdom.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God not as floating above the clouds or beyond a thin place where you can reach a hand through to the other side. God's kingdom isn't a neat, orderly, predictable place. Rather he describes heaven as a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl or the best fish buried within the larger ho hum catch. This kingdom can grow wildly like from the tiny seed of the mustard plant into a trashy, invasive bush, or like yeast that increases the volume of bread dough. The minuscule mustard seed is often undetectable in the sack among other favored seeds. The farmer has a planned crop and doesn't expect a mustard tree, actually a large bush, to appear. It's invasive and takes over like Spanish Moss that is everywhere in our southern states. This subversive plant pushes the boundaries of our orderly expectations. Jesus's stories use ordinary familiar places & experiences of his culture. The kingdom of heaven is in these places, hiding from his unknowing listeners in plain sight. Things aren't as they seem.

We are miraculously created in God's image, born from God, with a spark of the divine in each of our souls. God spends our whole lives yearning for & guiding us back into an intimate relationship with him (and her). Maybe, like me, you feel a tug toward something outside yourself, other than the goals & milestones our culture deems important such as money, power, a good job, or social status. The older we become the more we understand that the joys of life aren't rooted in these aspirations. They aren't the treasure we really seek; hopefully, we eventually realize to look inward for that treasure Jesus describes. John of the Cross, a 16th c.

Spanish priest, writes that the treasure we seek is actually a connection to God that's hidden in the field of our soul like a perfect pearl hidden among lesser pearls or the tastiest fish hidden within the whole catch.

We can't find this kingdom of heaven treasure through sheer will power or our brain's logical thinking. The path to discovery is through the heart, prayerfully, meditatively, spiritually. And, the good news is we have help! We don't have to search alone. In his letter to the Romans Paul says essentially that the Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. We don't even know what we should pray for or how to pray as we should, but the Holy Spirit prays for us with such feeling that it cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows, of course, what the Spirit is saying as he pleads for us in harmony with God's own will. I've read that we could even just recite the letters of the alphabet if we were unsure how to pray. On our behalf the Spirit will form the right words with the letters.

The lion, scarecrow and tin man wander all over the land of Oz searching for elusive human qualities only to display those gifts that they each desired. The Scarecrow who wants a brain solves all their problems with logic and common sense. The Lion who craves courage proves his bravery in the dangers along the way. The Tin Man who claims to have no heart, cries compassionate tears over accidentally stepping on and killing a beetle. Each already possessed the very gift he wanted, but it was hidden in plain sight until they looked in the depths of their being...their souls?

What mustard seeds are hiding in the fields of our souls, waiting, with the sighs and tugs of the HS, to push us beyond our boundaries, to see what might be hidden? To transform what we thought we knew in unexpected ways by our surprising God.

The kingdom of God—heaven—isn't a mysterious place we'll only experience after we die. The good loving people we are, made in God's image, have the kingdom of heaven within and around us already, often hidden in plain sight. Look for it in everyday life, in unexpected places, through unusual, unfamiliar people.

Prayer, meditation, reading scripture can help us till the fields of our souls to find the pearl treasure that is God's kingdom. May we pray daily to use our brains to understand God's message, our hearts to absorb God's love, and to have courage to welcome surprising mustard seeds into our lives that push our boundaries.

God calls to us in many surprising ways. Be open to daily interruptions, surprises, or challenges. I've heard these described as "opportunities to love." Look and listen for the kingdom of God hidden among our day to day routines. Take the mustard seed which is your unique character trait, talent, or gift and grow it with the yeast of loving actions to share God's kingdom here on earth...not in a forever place, but NOW, today!

How Heavenly will that be!!