

What stands out to me in these parables is all that's not apparent. The potential of a mustard seed to become a shelter and home to birds of every kind; the pearl of great value that takes time and effort to find; the treasure hidden in a field. They need uncovering, they need to

Jesus is trying to help the people understand - "THIS is what the kingdom of heaven is like!" He's trying to uncover for us what is hidden from our eyes. That the kingdom of heaven has come near is a big piece of the good news he has been proclaiming. But the people are hearing it, maybe even wanting to believe him, but the question is persistent wherever Jesus goes - "What is this kingdom of heaven?" And so he gives them parables.

Parables are tricky things. They aren't actually capable of containing the whole truth, only a piece of it. That's maybe why Jesus told so many different parables. Explaining this elusive thing that's not observable, that's not apparent, is hard. With each parable giving only a glimpse of the kingdom, understanding is even harder. Jesus understands this, but even as near as the kingdom has apparently come, it remains hidden from our eyes.

I have a friend who just got a scary diagnosis about the future of her ability to see. Her eyes are apparently sick so they are doing more tests to find a course of treatment and next steps.

These things happen in life. A diagnosis, a surgery, the loss of a loved one, a hard family conflict, etc. Sometimes we're able to weather hard things. It helps when the "happiness to sadness quotient" in our lives is good enough to withstand the hard stuff. But when that "happiness quotient" is not enough to withstand bad news or deal with hard things, what's not apparent stays hidden.

To receive that kind of news is hard enough. It's scary. But when you're lonely, when finances are uncertain, when your child is suffering, when you've lost a loved one who was the last living connection you had to the love of your life or your deceased father, what's apparent can utterly drown out even curiosity about what might be hidden from our eyes.

But Jesus is trying to keep us curious about what's hidden. So he gives us these parables to chew on, drawing out our imaginations and our speculations. There's something more in these parables and also life itself than what's apparent. That place of something more than the apparent is where our hope finally lives.

Paul knows this, but he works very hard to show people that place and without the use of parables. This passage of Romans 8 is chock full of what isn't readily apparent. That the Spirit intercedes with us when we simply don't have the words to express to God our pain and sadness, our defeat, or the hurt we feel at being so relentlessly up against the hardest things in life. That sighs too deep for words are where the Spirit stirs and knows and surfaces what's hidden from even ourselves. That God works through all the hardnances of life toward good, somehow, making a way where there is no way. That God is for us and that nothing can overcome that.

Paul tells us, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors." He talks about the apparent things that we fear will overcome us: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, swords and whatever might also be on your list. He's looking squarely at these things that make us feel at times "accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." And then he tells us that "in all these things we are more than conquerors... For I am convinced," he says. "I am convinced."

I tell her, "It's going to be alright." Is that true? Is that how life goes? Will it all be alright? The truth is we don't know. The truth is we suspect it won't. The truth is that what is apparent towers over the hope of which Paul is so convinced that it's hard to see. In fact, at times, we don't see it, obscured as it is by all that's so obviously against us.

But here is Jesus, telling us these parables.

Jesus, as though speaking through a thick mist, giving shape to the possibility of what we're as yet unable to see or even truly imagine; Jesus, the one from the beginning, we hear in the prologue to John's gospel. He is the Word that took flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. God, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who came to make God known.

Jesus came, became apparent, to make apparent the hope that we cannot always see. That hope Paul describes as the inability of everything to separate us from God's love. That love is made apparent in Christ, who is relentless in his efforts to make that love known. Parable after parable, he tries again and again, one glimpse at a time.

That extravagant, unconditionally patient giving of Jesus, the relentless "try this one" - could this be part of the message, the good news? Part of what he makes known about God? If so, the kingdom of heaven is not, it seems, the pearl of great value or the treasure hidden in a field. It's not the abundant catch of fish that needs sorting. Could the kingdom of heaven be what these people do in response to what they've found? The surprise and joy, the wild extravagance of selling all they have? Could this be a reflection of God and the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is aiming to get across? This joyful, unmeasured, irrational response - is this not a reflection of our response to sudden conviction? Is it not God's response to our finally seeing what Jesus has made apparent?

What then are we to say about these things? Paul asks. That nothing “in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Not because we get it, but because we are loved. Not because we are innocent, but because we are loved; not that we won’t suffer in life, but that we are loved, God will walk with us through all that life throws in the way. God gives up everything because a pearl of great value and a buried treasure have been found. You have been found and nothing will get between you and this extravagant God.

AMEN