
Jesus' Kingdom Parables

SCOTT HOEZEE

Preachers, teachers and writers spend a good bit of time coming up with apt analogies. Sometimes, when a certain idea or concept is difficult to understand, a good analogy can help. You take something hard to figure out and relate it to something easier, and then the analogy of the easier idea helps clarify the harder idea; but that means the analogy needs to fit; a big idea needs to be made analogous to another big thing; but when Jesus tried to help people understand the really big reality of the kingdom of God, the parables he told did surprising things. Today on *Groundwork*, we look at Jesus' parables of the kingdom. Stay tuned.

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And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now episode three in a four-part series on how the Bible presents the kingdom of God. In the first program, we looked at how the concept of the kingdom of God was often misunderstood by people who were looking for a powerful political kingdom, but Jesus' kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. In that first program, we also traced the Old Testament background to the New Testament's presentation of God's kingdom.

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And in our second program, we focused on how Jesus brought the kingdom of God near to us in our life and in our ministry, and how we do this still today. We want to look at today Jesus teaching the kingdom of God in the essence of the parables, and I know we cannot get through all the parables, but there are a lot of them that point to the direction of explaining what the kingdom of God is for the people.

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We are going to start in Matthew 13. We will stay in Matthew 13 this whole segment of this program, Darrell. We could do the whole program on Matthew 13. It has got seven parables in it, most of them fairly short, but it also has some other important teachings; but we want to pick up on the parables of the kingdom particularly in Matthew 13. The chapter begins with a parable that is in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. That is the parable of the sower. We are not really going to look at that here, but it is in all three, and of the thirty-six parables Jesus told, there are only a couple...a few that are in all three. So, you know it is important; and you probably remember that parable. It is a farmer who goes out and sows seed and the seed falls on various types of soil: rocky, weedy, on the road and the birds take it away, and finally on some good soil and that becomes, for Jesus, an analogy—a teaching of different kinds of hearts on which the Word of God falls; and it is only going to grow in certain contexts.

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DARRELL DELANEY

What I love about parables, and I mean, an idea of what a parable is is a natural teaching for a spiritual truth; and you mentioned it in the teaser, where there is an analogy...there is an apt analogy. These people whom he is talking to are in an agrarian nature. They know about farming; they know about fields; they know about sheep. When Jesus uses these things to teach then each and every day when they run into them, they have a constant reminder of what Jesus has taught. So, it is really important that Jesus specifically uses things like seeds to help them understand what the kingdom of God is, because that concept is far beyond us if he doesn't help us.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

The imagery is, as you just said, very familiar to the people who would have first heard these, but they found the parables themselves and exactly what Jesus was doing with these familiar things to be rather confusing. In fact, after he tells the parable of the sower, the disciples come up to Jesus and say: Why do you talk like

that? People don't get it. Why are you talking about seeds and birds and farmers? And you know, you expect Jesus to say: Well, the reason I speak in parables is because I want to help people understand. He doesn't say that at all. Jesus says the reason he preaches in parables is because he wants to be confusing. He doesn't want them to understand just yet, because he wants the deeper truth of the kingdom to be disclosed slowly over time and through the help of the Holy Spirit, who alone can help us understand these parables.

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Yes; and so, he actually used it as a discernment tool, because he said that the ones who were of the Father, and who are children of God, would be able to understand those things by the Holy Spirit; and so the Holy Spirit was the one who would give the truth and the understanding in these parables; and Jesus would use them as kind of a sifting process to know who is his and who isn't.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; so, we are going to begin with the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13. It begins at verse 24. We should note that we are not going to explain exactly all the ins and outs of it, but in Matthew, it is always the kingdom of heaven...

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Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the other gospels and the rest of the New Testament it is the kingdom of God, but Matthew uses the kingdom of heaven; but let's listen to this: Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed

weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' ²⁸'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

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DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is really important for the people to understand what he is saying about the kingdom of heaven, where the wheat and the weeds may be growing in the same spot, and the enemy is doing that. That is actually a small picture of what the already and not yet, which we will get to later in this program, how the kingdom has begun, but there are also some issues going on; and Jesus is not really fully explaining the details of what it means, but he is planting a seed...no pun intended...to help them understand the kingdom of God is operating in a different way.

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And again, it is rather surprising. You would think that the kingdom of God is so big and so important that it should come to dominate, right? It shouldn't have to coexist with people who aren't part of the kingdom, much less those who are actually working against the kingdom. So, we want to say: Well, we cannot let that be. We have to take up all those weeds; we just want the kingdom to dominate and we don't want to see

anything else. In other words, we think that, as we said a little bit in the first program, too, of this series, Darrell, sometimes we think the Church has to seize political power and *force* the kingdom...force everybody to live in kingdom ways. Uproot those weeds; and surprisingly, the owner says: No; let them the grow together; and just be assured that God will take care of it in the end. Do not worry; do not be upset that you are living in the midst of unbelievers, and even people who are actively persecuting the Church. That is the way it is going to be for now, but in the end, I (God) will take care of it.

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Yes; you know, historically speaking, we have seen that it hasn't gone well when the Church has tried to seize power and use it to enforce religion on folks. That has not been the way that God wanted it to go; and at the end, he will end up sorting these things together. I mean, Jesus does a number of parables in Matthew 13, as you mentioned earlier, that talk about the kingdom of God; and the theme is basically what God is doing and how it works. So, in 13, in verses 31b, it says:

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“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

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³²He told them [still] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Moving ahead a little bit) ⁴⁴“The kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Finally) ⁴⁵“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it (that pearl).

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pearl).

So, we said at the beginning, Darrell, that if you are a preacher, teacher, or writer and you want to come up with an analogy, a big thing should be related to another big thing, and Jesus keeps doing the opposite. He takes the big thing of the kingdom and he relates it to the tiniest of all things.

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The world would just lay out the red carpet and make sure everybody knew, toot every horn, and made sure you grabbed attention; but the kingdom of God is amazing and so powerful and so valuable that even he can do something *small!* For God to do something small that is a big God is a really powerful thing.

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Exactly; and again, we need to resist the temptation to make the Church big and bold and brash because we think that is what it should look like. Nope; we cannot do that. Let God do his kingdom thing his way.

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Segment 2

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and let's stay in the Gospel of Matthew now and pick up in this segment two more parables that are also highly surprising, as were the ones we just saw in Matthew 13. These have less to do with the appearance of the kingdom and more to do with the values and the ways of the kingdom. So, let's begin with Matthew 20.

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It says: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'"

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SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the basic setup here: The vineyard owner does five rounds of hiring in the course of the day, and that means some worked twelve whole hours, while the last ones hired worked a whopping one hour; and in between, some worked nine, six, and three hours; but Darrell, the kicker of this parable comes when Jesus says that the vineyard owner made a point to pay the one-hour crew first.

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It is interesting that the landowner knows there is work to be done, and he continues to go out at periodic parts of the day to recruit workers; and each one of them comes in and does their best work; and so, you know, you would think that, okay, the last one that got this amount of money...so, maybe the other ones are calculating what they could get.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, he gives them a whole denarius, which is what he promised to the folks at 6:00 AM. So, now those 6:00 AM hires...they are doing a little math. It is like, oh, we thought it was one denarius a day; it is one denarius an hour. We are going to get twelve denarii. We are going to go home. We can stop and buy the wife some flowers and get a nice bottle of wine. But no; when it comes time for them to get paid, they get exactly what they had been promised: They get the same for working twelve hours as the one-hour folks, and that doesn't sit well at all; especially since those ne'er-do-wells had slept in and lazed around eleven hours of the twelve working hours of the day; whereas, you know, the twelve-hour folks had been eager beavers. They were there at the crack of dawn, you know.

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Here is the end of the parable:

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^{10b}“But each one of them (the twelve-hour folks) also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²‘Those who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ¹³But he (the owner) answered them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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By the way, Darrell, just a little aside here: In the Gospel of Matthew, it is never good to be called, "*friend*." It happens about four times; the last time will be Judas when he betrays him: What have you come for, *friend*? So, don't sing *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* when you are preaching on Matthew's gospel. The word is going to pop up in the next parable too, but the point is, the kingdom of God is about being saved by grace alone, right?

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, the elimination of meritocracy happens in this passage. So, you know, for those who think that they are going to earn more from God because they worked harder or longer, God is not measuring by that at all. God is measuring by his own benevolence; his own generosity; and we should remember that in our own walk with Jesus. If we have been walking with Jesus for a day or walking with Jesus for forty, fifty, sixty years, the rewards are not up to us...

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And God is not saying: Oh, well; because you worked for fifty years you are going to get more grace than the person who just got saved yesterday. No; I think that God is trying to show that his grace is the most important thing in the passage.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things I tell my preaching students about parables is: Think about your congregation. What character in a parable are most people in your church most likely to identify with? Who do they think they are? Well, in this case, I think most of us who have been Christians for a while, we assume we are the twelve-hour folks, right? We assume that we are...we were the twelve-hour workers; but Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon, pulled the rug out from underneath us and said: How do you know you are not the one-hour guy? Who told you you were the twelve-hour guy? Maybe you are the one-hour guy; and those one-hour guys just thank their lucky stars for getting a whole denarius, that joy should be your joy every day. Don't assume that you are the twelve-hour worker. I love that. It is all grace.

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One of the things I tell my preaching students about parables is: Think about your congregation. What character in a parable are most people in your church most likely to identify with? Who do they think they are? Well, in this case, I think most of us who have been Christians for a while, we assume we are the twelve-hour folks, right? We assume that we are...we were the twelve-hour workers; but Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon, pulled the rug out from underneath us and said: How do you know you are not the one-hour guy? Who told you you were the twelve-hour guy? Maybe you are the one-hour guy; and those one-hour guys just thank their lucky stars for getting a whole denarius, that joy should be your joy every day. Don't assume that you are the twelve-hour worker. I love that. It is all grace.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is all grace. It is really powerful. Let's hear another one from Matthew 22 that Jesus teaches. It says: Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ²“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. (Later on in the verses it says:) ⁸Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ ¹⁰So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

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SCOTT HOEZEE

So, another surprise. The people on the A list of possible guests at a royal feast refuse the invitation to the banquet. These are the people you would expect to see dining with the king: movie stars, rich people, powerful political figures, the folks who are on the red carpet before the Academy Awards or before some glitzy fund-raising dinner in New York City's fashion district; but they don't come; and so, who does end up having a grand time and drinking the finest of wine and eating the finest of food? Street folks; urchins; ordinary folks—some good, some less than good—but they are the ones, Darrell, in the kingdom. So, another surprise.

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Yes; the surprise is that those who society would look over...look down and leave out are the ones who are invited to the table to eat with the king and have a party at the wedding. So, that is definitely back-again, counterintuitive, upside-down.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

God's kingdom flies upside down. Then we get this surprising twist, Darrell, in verse 11 there of Matthew 22: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹²He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. ¹³ Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴For many are invited but few are chosen."

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; I don't remember reading about wedding clothes or having a certain attire: Black-tie affair; what are you doing in jeans? What are you doing here? But the king is inspecting whoever was invited. So, you are not going to be able to get in on your own terms or get in in your own way. If you are invited into the kingdom, it is because salvation has come to your heart; the Holy Spirit has called you; and it is not because you did good or you had the right words to say or you knew some connections. That is not how it works.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, a wedding crasher; but he snuck in on his own and didn't have the clothes, and he was thrown out. So, it didn't end well for him. Many are invited but few are chosen. So, you know, yet another surprise. But in a moment, we are going to wrap up with one more teaching and one more parable that helps us recognize the kingdom of God today. So, stay tuned.

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Segment 3

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DARRELL DELANEY

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's conclude this program initially...not with another parable...we do have one more we are going to get to, but something else that Jesus says in Luke 17, and I think we may have looked at this in an earlier program in this series, too, but Luke 17:20: Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed,²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

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It says that in the King James Version. They do use: The kingdom of God is within you. So, it is interesting how Jesus is painstakingly describing the kingdom of God in terms of what is happening and what the values are and what the behavior is; and then he says: You cannot see it tangibly, but it is within you. So, he is really helping us to understand that the concept of the kingdom of God is here, but it is not fully here; and we will get to more of that in the next episode...

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. It is huge, as we just said, and yet, it is quiet...small, like a mustard seed, as we have seen earlier in this program. The way it operates, the way it assigns values is completely different from the political kingdoms of this world throughout history, and right up to this present day; and that ties in, Darrell, with something we said in the very first program of this kingdom of God series; namely that, for now, God's kingdom is not something with borders; not something you could locate on a map. Instead, the kingdom is present...it is within us...it comes near to us...it comes near to those around us...whenever and wherever the will of king Jesus holds sway. When we live like Jesus lived, when we serve others with humility, that is where the kingdom is.

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DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing, and even though it is not fully here yet, it is inbreaking and it is inaugurated by him saying it and him demonstrating it. He is restoring broken things back to the way they were before the fall. You know, when people are walking around with lame legs, that he heals them; and there is leprosy and there are diseases and things. He is restoring things back to the way they were; but a lot of people are waiting for that great day of the Lord, and when will that be? We don't know exactly, but there is a parable that talks about it.

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DARRELL DELANEY

It says: "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' ⁷Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish one said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' ⁹'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' ¹²But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

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So again, like most parables, this one has some surprising elements in it. Why did half the bridesmaids think to bring extra oil? And once everyone's lamps go out, why did the wiser women refuse to share with those who had not packed spare oil? I mean, that doesn't seem very Jesus-like...it doesn't seem very kind. Jesus sets an example of generosity and now these women are kind of stingy; but maybe we shouldn't scrutinize or atomize every element of the story. Jesus told this to be bracing. He told us that the coming of the kingdom is serious business and you've got to be ready.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; either you are ready or you are not. There is another opportunity that Jesus talks about when the servant is found doing the work when the master returns. That is the servant who is commended, and I think that this being ready and being watchful is part of the concept of the kingdom of God, but there are things that we can do while we are waiting; and Jesus is teaching this toward the end of his ministry, but right before he goes into arrest and crucifixion.

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Right; this is Matthew 25, which is part of what is often called the Olivet Discourses. It is some of the last things he did before Holy Week came. Well, this is after the Triumphal Entry, but over and over in these chapters, Jesus tells us to keep watch; and you were just saying: What does that mean? Well, we know that Jesus does not want us just to be twiddling our thumbs; be starry-eyed and watching the skies. No; he expects us to work, like that servant you just mentioned. Be faithful. You know, when we are faithful...when we do acts of kindness...when we live as Jesus lived, that is what it means to keep watch; that is what it means to be ready. Just do your work. You know, I have often thought in that passage you just referred to, which is also here in Matthew, just making dinner for the servants at the proper time. That is keeping watch? Yes; yes; just do your work. It kind of reminds me of something attributed to Martin Luther, who somebody said: What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow? He said: I think I would go out and plant an apple tree. I mean, he is just saying: I am going to just keep doing my normal work; and by the way, in the new creation, an apple tree will have a future, too. So, just be faithful. Do your work. Bear the fruit of the Spirit. That is what it means to keep watch.

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You know, Brother Lawrence, he had this idea of practicing the presence of God in everything he did, whether he was planting plants or washing dishes. Just being able to understand that everything he did was a spiritual act. Evelyn Underhill has a book called *The Spiritual Life*, where there is no distinction between secular work and sacred work. Like the work that we do as believers is spiritual and an act of worship, especially when we do it with gratitude to God for what he has done for us. So, that is a way to demonstrate how the kingdom of God operates.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Julian of Norwich had a great line, too, about Christ among the pots and pans. Christ in the ordinary. What you just said from Evelyn Underhill reminds me, too, isn't there somewhere in the prophets...I think it is in the minor prophets somewhere...maybe it is in Isaiah, but it is in the prophets, where they basically say: Every cowbell...that you could inscribe on every cowbell: Sacred to the Lord. There is no sacred/secular distinction in the end. Everything can be used for God's good.

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Well, we started this program in Matthew 13, let's now end it with one other thing Jesus said in that chapter, in verse 16, when he says to the disciples: Blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

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So, Darrell, if those words describe us as people who even now can see the kingdom of God within us and in our midst...if that is us, then all we can say is thanks be to God.

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