

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

What Is Heaven Like?

How would you describe the color green to a blind person? You would probably start to talk about things that are green, like leaves or grass, or other things the blind person would have come in contact with. You might use other senses to talk about green, like describing it as “cool,” “smooth,” or “fresh.” You might use emotional descriptions to try and make it clear to the blind person, describing the color green as “soothing,” “calming,” or “inspiring.” It’s quite a challenge to describe something to someone who has no experience that would make it understandable.

We humans are truly remarkable, however. We can actually use one sensory experience to understand another one, even if we lack the other sense. Some people can’t help having this experience. There is a condition called Synesthesia, which is where a person experiences a kind of sensory cross-over. She might hear sounds as flavors. A barking dog may taste like green beans. The sound of a violin may taste like peppermint. Or he might see letters as colors, each letter with its own distinct color. So every time the person sees the letter “A” it is always brown, and the letter “Q” is always red. There is a variety of ways that Synesthesia affects people. Some people may associate certain smells with a texture. Some people may see colors when they listen to music. In fact some famous musicians are synesthetes. Billy Joel sees sounds as color, and sees letters as colors. Stevie Wonder experiences music as color, interesting for a man who went blind not long after his birth. Kanye West also sees music as colors. Duke Ellington heard timbre as colors, so the same note from a different instrument may be a different color.

Other famous synesthetes include Marilyn Monroe, Vincent Van Gogh, writer Vladimir Nabakov, and poet Arthur Rimbaud.

They don't think that Shakespeare was actually synesthetic but he was a master of the sensory cross-over. When he wrote Act 1, Scene 1 of Hamlet and used the phrase, "'tis bitter cold," he didn't need to explain to anyone what bitter cold felt like. People just knew. In fact, the phrase seems so self-evident to me that I was surprised when someone first pointed out that it was a synesthetic expression. I never thought about the taste of bitter when I heard it. I just felt the chill.

So many of our poetic expressions utilize this little trick of describing one sensory experience in terms of another. It was Shakespeare again who gave us the, "green-eyed monster" of jealousy. Because of that we say that someone is green with envy. We say that someone who is really angry is seeing red. We also say that someone who is sad is feeling blue. Someone who is feeling particularly blue may even sing the blues. Of course there's a difference between music that is blue and comedy that is blue. If you don't know what blue comedy is, it's humor that is off color.

Some scientists believe that it is human beings' unique ability to transfer experiences across sensory lines that is the basis of abstract thought, and therefore language and communication. It is certainly the basis of metaphor, simile, and analogy. Think about it. You can look at little black letters printed on a white page and have all kinds of sensory experiences in your mind. Imagine if you were a music critic writing for a newspaper or magazine. It would be your job to write about how music sounds, how it makes you feel, how the rhythms, tones and timbres of the notes translate into an emotional experience for the listener. You would probably use all kinds of words that describe color, and texture, and even temperature. None of which

have anything really to do with music. And all of it would be communicated by arranging the same 26 letters in particular ways. That's like a super power, when you think about it. It is human beings' super power, this ability to communicate a foreign experience to one another.

It is this ability that Jesus puts to work when he tries to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like. How would you describe an experience that your listener has no analog by which to understand? You would have to create comparisons to things that are familiar. What is the kingdom of heaven like? It is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast. It is like a hidden treasure, or a pearl of great worth. These familiar things are invoked not as a direct comparison, but as hints and clues about that mysterious kingdom about which Jesus is always talking. They give us a glimpse of what we cannot see. They tantalize our appetites and make us long to know it more fully.

Jesus can't tell us directly what the kingdom of heaven is like, but he uses colorful ways of making his point. We understand that like a mustard seed the kingdom of heaven may start out small and insignificant, like Jesus himself, and end up the greatest of shrubs. And like yeast the kingdom of heaven can make a huge difference in the world even if it is small in comparison to all the other influences out there. We get that. It makes sense to us. We can imagine what it feels like to find a treasure hidden in a field, a treasure so valuable that we sell all we have to buy that field, because the value of the treasure far surpasses anything we have ever seen before. Just like the pearl merchant who finds that one pearl that he simply must have at all costs, that pearl that makes every other pearl seem like a worthless speck of sand.

These comparisons explain to us the joy that is to be found there, in that mysterious kingdom. They convey what a million more words never could by leveraging our worldly experience and understanding against things for which there simply aren't words. And it works.

Suddenly we are there. Jesus transports us into the kingdom of heaven. We know it now. We know how to recognize it from his description. We find in his person and in his words a new way of looking at this world, a new potential that we didn't see before. He speaks of change, slow and steady, small yet growing, and we are challenged to be the agents of that change. He speaks of finding value in surprising places and we learn to look for God's hand, "at work in the world about us," and we try to cooperate with that work. He speaks of joy beyond any earthly joy, yet recognizable in this life, and we seek it out, opening our hearts to receive that joy and the peace that passes all understanding.

Jesus makes the kingdom of heaven real. He gives us access to it. He invites us into it. He challenges us to seek it, to build it, to spread it, and to invite others in as well. This place we've never been to, this state of mind and heart that is beyond our reach, this mysterious kingdom inaccessible to our senses, feels like home. When we can't express it adequately, when words fail us, God's own spirit, "intercedes with sighs too deep for words," and we realize that we don't need to go on a journey, but that the kingdom comes to us, just as Jesus came to us... being born in a stable, walking on water, appearing inside locked rooms. It's not a foreign country Jesus describes. It's a treasure hidden in the human heart, one that was purchased by Jesus himself and given to you as a free gift. To accept it you need only first to recognize its surpassing value, then simply give your all to him and you will receive a kingdom that can never be taken away.

Amen.