

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

PASSING YOUR BIBLE QUIZ

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

31He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

33He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

44The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51Have you understood all this? They answered, "Yes." 52And he

said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

DIAGNOSIS: Flunking Your Bible Quiz

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Puzzled*

Biblical illiteracy is widespread. People just do not read the Bible like they used to. They are ignorant of the most basic things in the Bible. They think Genesis is in the New Testament. They think Moses walked on water. They think Jesus authored the Ten Commandments.

Our biblical ignorance may not be as bad. We may not do as poorly when quizzed. But we still have a problem. We are confused, troubled and puzzled by a Bible that defies interpretation, especially when it comes to interpreting Jesus' parables. In today's Gospel, for example, if we were plowing someone else's field and found a treasure, should we not tell the owner about it instead of scheming to buy the field? If finding a pearl of great value is about getting our priorities straight, then how are we doing? What are the most important things in our lives? Do they reflect the fact that we follow Jesus? If the mustard seed and the yeast are about recognizing potential where there does not seem to be much potential, if the great catch of fish is about patience and withholding judgment, how are we doing? We want quick fixes. We can't help but offer our opinions about others and are often quick to throw others overboard.

We don't seem to be doing very well on this quiz. We are puzzled and confused. Not only does the Bible not seem to be very clear, Jesus is puzzling. Applying Jesus' parables to our lives consistently and honestly is next to impossible.

Admitting that is even more difficult. Just like the disciples, when quizzed about understanding Jesus and his parables, we naively answer Yes. However, when the time to actually take the quiz arrives, we are just like Jesus' disciples. We deny, betray and flee leaving Jesus alone to die on the cross.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Clueless*

The problem is not just that we don't know the answers. The problem is that we don't understand the questions. Jesus' parables are about what God is doing in Jesus. The parables are not about what we are supposed to do and what is up to us. We don't hear that. We would rather be questioned about what we have done. As long as we maintain that belief, we bury the treasure and throw away the pearl. We remain clueless. We scratch our heads and wonder what Jesus means. This is a very strange quiz indeed.

What do a tiny seed and little bit of leaven have to do with God and the Kingdom? We want immediate results. Faith in God should "work." Waiting for a tiny seed to grow into a tree big enough for birds to nest? Watching a little bit of yeast make dough rise into 40 loaves of bread? Who can wait and watch like that? This is absurd. Jesus can't possibly mean that. Jesus can't possibly be asking us to believe such foolishness. He must be asking us about something else. We want him to ask us about what we have done and accomplished, ... whether we have been sufficiently committed, patient and willing to wait.

Of course, we have convinced ourselves that we have accomplished something. Yes, we answer. We get it. We are ready. We are sure that can pass the final exam.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Flunked!*

No. Wrong. We flunk!

God finally will quiz us. There will be a final exam. There will

finally be a sorting out of good and bad. Despite our protests to the contrary, we who have trusted only in ourselves will no longer be able to hide the fact that we have failed to trust God and live our lives accordingly. Our pious slobbering about our good deeds is only a cover-up disguising the fact that we don't have a clue to what God is doing in Jesus. We don't even understand the questions on the quiz. Those who flunk God's ultimate quiz are "thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

PROGNOSIS: Passing Your Bible Quiz

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Passing the Quiz*

But God wants us to pass the quiz, no matter what! God is even willing to give us the answers for the quiz. God will even take the quiz and pass it for us.

Through these parables Jesus does not just quiz us about what we are supposed to do. They are about what God has done and continues to do for us! Like all of Jesus' parables, they are peculiar and strange stories that turn the world upside down and inside out. It is not up to us to make that tiny seed grow. It is not up to us to be the leaven that makes the dough rise. These parables are about what God is doing in Jesus. Hidden in tiny seed and the microscopic specks of leavening, hidden in the ordinary carpenter's son from Nazareth, in water, bread and wine, in the simple deeds of the Christian community, God is at work dealing with our foolishness, stupidity and sin in a way that we never expected.

God is the one in the field who discovers the treasure. God is the merchant who relentlessly searches for the pearl. God is joyfully willing to pay a steep price for the treasure in the field and pearl of great value with "all that he had," even the death of his own Son. God in Jesus is willing to join all the rotten fish thrown out of the net into "the furnace of fire

where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” so that they will no longer be worthless. God is willing to suffer the fate of all those who flunk the final exam so that God can raise them with Jesus and give them a perfect score. When the semester ends, when this world (or their lives) ends, He wants their name at the top of the list with those with the best grades.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Figuring It Out*

When we realize that God loves us this much and values us this highly, we have figured it out. Then we “understand” why Jesus told these parables. We are the pearl of great value not because we have done what was up to us. We are so highly valued because of what God has done for us. God so treasured us that God was willing to give up everything he had for us. Our hearts cling to what God has done rather than what we have done. Then, even though we might feel small and insignificant, like a mustard seed, like a speck of yeast, we know that we matter to God. Then, even though we have repeatedly flunked, Christ will take all our bad grades off our hands. Instead, he gives us a perfect score. We thought we were so small and insignificant, but we will have become a great tree sheltering the nests of birds. We will have leavened a truckload of bread.

Even more, with repentance we will get to re-prioritize our lives. For each of us it will look different. We will no longer need to cling to what does not matter. Because we are so valued, we will get to “sell all that we have” and take hold of the treasure of our new life in Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Sharing the Answers*

In that new life, we see and understand the world differently. Our neighbors are no longer our competitors. They are no longer rivals seeking to displace us on the teacher’s grading curve. They are no longer irritants to distract us from our career

goals. They too are all valued, priceless treasure and cherished pearls, for whom we are willing to sacrifice our time and talent so that they too might be "trained for the kingdom of heaven." We do not need to keep the answers to the quiz to ourselves for fear that it will hurt our standing in the class. Instead we can share the answers. Instead we can "tell the good news always and if necessary use words" assuring all that in Christ God values them so highly. Then they can be sure that, when God finally gives them their final Bible Quiz, they will pass with flying colors.