

*The Purloined Letter* is one of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous short stories. As the title would easily clue you in, the story is about a stolen letter that is being used to blackmail somebody. The thief is known but the problem is to retrieve the letter. A not that smart French policeman concerned with physical details and evidence is on the case, but he ends up spending a whole month searching the thief's house, from floor to ceiling, without any luck. Yet when Detective Dupin comes in, he finds the letter right away. The trick, Dupin will explain, is that you don't have to search so thoroughly, you just have to think differently. The letter was there all along, only disguised, but hidden in plain sight, and because it did not look like what you would have thought, wasn't there where you would have expected it, nobody – at least no French Cartesian rationalist - could find it. This kind of mystery required an eccentric “out of the beaten paths” investigator ready to have a fresh look at things.

People look for God in the strangest places, don't they? I mean, not only in our culture where we try to combine different kind of spirituality, take trips to the other end of the world, try out yoga, diets, or even drugs to experience the divine. At Jesus's time, people tried very hard to find God. Some of them would hide in monasteries with very strict discipline, some of them would read and re-read the Torah, trying to figure that all out: the best way to observe the Sabbath, the best way to offer a sacrifice – because you know God is so far away and so holy and so complicated, we really have to search the world from floor to ceiling to find a little piece of evidence that would somewhat guide us.

And yet today. Yet today, Jesus, being his own kind of Detective Dupin, takes a fresh look at the whole God mystery and comes in to tell us that the only reason we don't find God is that because we figure God is in a secret place. We figure God is in a hidden place when God is right here. Right here, in the midst of us, hidden if you will, yet hidden in plain sight. Jesus today offers us five parables, five parables about the kingdom of God that are all about everyday life and how ordinary people can find God. Not the smartest people, not the rational, methodical people, but the weird and the quirky, the ones who, like Dupin and like Jesus himself, dare to think and mostly dare to feel and act a little bit differently than how they were taught to do.

Today, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a malicious woman who puts yeast in the flour to bake a huge bread, at a time when yeast was considered as impure and you should not use it. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is a man who finds a treasure in a field he does not owe, and without telling anyone, quickly buy the field. Or it is like a merchant who against all economic logic, sells it all, just to buy a thing a beauty. Or the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, not a nice domesticated rose, but a sort of ivy that grows wild and crazy. Or again, it is like this huge net that draws out of the ocean any kind of anything. Jesus, sort of, adds today a last beatitude in this passage of Matthew: *Happy are the weird*. Happy are the weird because they will see price, beauty and greatness in every day life, they will see what is hidden in plain sight, they will see what others cannot see.

Jesus, as he tells these stories, as he preaches to these ordinary men and women struggling with their everyday problems, as he preaches in front of the scribes and the Pharisees and all of those who try hard to domesticate God in a well-behaved religion, Jesus asks them that, instead of approaching the Holy One by being so righteous and wise, they would identify just one minute with those strange characters, all of them a little bit of a dreamer and of an artist, all of them excited and joyful, risks takers for the sake of what they value above all things.

We usually don't understand our first reading, and the request of King Solomon. We generally assume that Solomon asks for wisdom – because “the wisdom of Solomon”, right? Yet in fact Solomon does not necessarily ask to be righteous. Solomon just asks for discernment, the ability to see, or as we sometimes translate the ability to hear, *a listening heart*. Solomon asks God to be available to God's presence, Solomon asks God to turn his eyes, and ears and heart away from the worldly way to see the world to a godly way to understand God's ways.

It's very different to have wisdom and to be a listener. Wisdom can be inside of us as something we end up holding on to. And having wisdom can make us this smart methodical person that barely makes mistakes. The thing is: with that, we may not find much more out there than what's already in our heads.

It's different to be a listener. When you are a listener, you have to rely on the one you listen to, as Paul asks today to rely on the Spirit to pray in us. It means: we have to be vigilant. Open. We have to rely, not on ourselves, but on our relationship with God to be made holy. We have just prayed this in our collect: "O God the protector of all who trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy". We can never say we're done, it's not that easy. Solomon was not done, actually we know that he grew apart from God as he got older. He got tired of listening, and turned to foreign gods who maybe did not ask of him so much attention!

It's so hard for us to reach God. It's hard to understand how badly we need to change the way we think and feel, to be converted. Not because God is so far away and we need so much more wisdom, but because God is so close and we need so much attentiveness and simplicity to be able to receive a God who is so humble and loving.

Because another thing about the Dupin story, is that the French investigator does not find the letter not only because he does not know how to look around him, but also because the letter does not look like what he expects. And maybe that's the main point for us as well. It's so hard to find God because God does not look like what we expect God to look like. As so, as I was reading these parables for today I was thinking, well, if Jesus asks us to become more like those characters in the stories, the merchant, the baker, the ivy, maybe, just maybe it's because Jesus identifies a little bit with them too. But you may already know that if you are not a very reasonable person, if you are already a bit of a poet or an artist, you know that when you write or paint or play a part – your art is about you. You speak, in a projected manner, about how it feels like to be you. And so Jesus as a storyteller when he tells stories does not speak so much about other people, than he speaks about how it is to be him.

Let's just think about it. Jesus tells the story of a man who gave up everything for the kingdom. Is there any time we can really give our everything for the kingdom? Who among us has done it? I am a priest and I know I am far from having given up everything.

Who has given up everything? Jesus.

Jesus has given everything for the kingdom, to bring the kingdom to us. Jesus has left the joys and delights of his kingdom in heaven to be incarnated in a Virgin and to die a shameful death on the cross. Jesus' stories don't talk so much about how us people should be. Jesus tells us how it feels like to be Jesus. How it feels like to be the word of God in the world with us.

God is this insane merchant, this tricky woman, this seed that grows to embrace the all earth. Jesus left the heavens to seek after each one of us. We are the pearl he is looking for, our hearts are the field his love grows all around like ivy, our world this flat unflavored bread in which Jesus will rise again, his net the redemption he offers to all. Jesus as all the stories teller tells stories that tells his own story. Because the only thing – if I may say so – the only thing Jesus has to offer it's his story. The Kingdom of God is not a place to be, the Kingdom of God is Christ among us, the Kingdom of God is Christ in us, the Kingdom of God is us being him. By him, and with him and in him: “Neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

God is hidden in plain sight. In everyday life, in everyday people.

Nadia Bolz Weber, a priest who ministers to the people on the street, runaways teenagers, drugs addicts, homeless, ex convicts and transgenders people, wrote this amazing book: “Finding God in All the Wrong People”: Finding God is all the wrong people, the weird people, or just the people we would not talk to. It can be a neighbor who just does not share our political views. But maybe the weird person is not another character, maybe the weird person is us and maybe that's where we have to start with. Reading our own story, like the scribes of the last parable, opening our own treasure, opening our own life, and just feel that we are very loved by God exactly as we are, and God does not want to change a thing at all but just make us our old self and stuff new and holy and offer Godself to us. God gave everything for us in Jesus so we can be deeply united to God, so we can be with God in the story. Because of course is not about us finding God, it never has been. It about letting God find us. Amen.