

Imaging the Word: *Art and Theology*

Telling It Slant: The Parables of the Mustard Seed, Leaven, Hidden Treasure, Pearl and Dragnet



Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

³¹ Jesus put before the crowds another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. ³² It 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.”

³³ He 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.”

⁴⁴ “The 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.

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

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

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And 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.”

Reflection

One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about it. Someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do, and there are no words that are true enough, right enough, *big* enough to explain. You grope around for something to say, but everything sounds either too vague or else too pious. You could talk about how your heart feels full to bursting sometimes or about the mystifying sense of community you feel when you come together with others to worship. You could talk about how even the worst things that happen to you become bearable on account of your faith. But the truth is, it is next to impossible to speak directly about holy things. How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can words describe what is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God?

We do not do it well, that is for sure. But because we must somehow try, we tend to talk about what we cannot say in terms of what we can. We tend to describe holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trusting that others will make the leap with us.

Jesus, of course, used this tactic all the time. Throughout the gospels, and in Matthew's gospel in particular, Jesus makes comparisons between religious things and mundane things. Sinners are like lost sheep. The word of God is like seed cast on different kinds of ground. God is like the owner of a vineyard. More than any other subject, however, Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the central teaching of Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels. To understand what he was talking about, it is important to know that when Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven, he did not mean “life after death.” The kingdom is, instead, Jesus' way of talking about life in the here and now, life lived in the present reality of God's grace, according to the will and rule of God. This is life lived "as if"—as if God was already fully in charge of the world, as if sin and death and darkness were removed from the face of the earth. And even for this central subject, Jesus chose to talk about it indirectly, using metaphor and simile to convey its reality. Over and over again he'd say "The kingdom of heaven is like this...", “the kingdom is like that,” telling his followers stories about brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and tares. And with each of these stories, he invites his listeners to explore what it means to live in the world as God intended it to be, as God is making it to be.

Artists, in turn, have over the years taken these stories as subjects for their own artistic expressions, turning Jesus' “word pictures” into real pictures and at the same time expanding them, bringing out deeper levels of meaning to the parables. In this Sunday's lesson, Jesus offers five “parables of the Kingdom, likening the Kingdom to a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a merchant in search of fine pearls and a dragnet. Here is a sampling of how artists have expressed and interpreted these stories.

Artistic Illumination

1. SONG: “Seeds” by the Collection, on *The Collection* (2011)

"**Mustard Seed**" by Damion Suomi, on "Needs a Little Water" (2011)

“Song of the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Seasons)” and **“Song of the Parable of the Treasure and Pearl of Great Price”** from John Hayles’ “Special songs of Jesus' Parables”

In illuminating the parables, two hymnals stand out: *And Jesus Said: Parables in Song* (Sela Publishing), which contains 55 songs based on Jesus’ stories, and the CRC/Faith Alive hymnal *Singing the New Testament*, which contains songs based on various New Testament passages.

And Jesus Said includes six songs related to the Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven:

“**O My Garden,**” set to the tune ‘Charlestown’, takes the perspective of the gardener marveling at the growth of the mustard seed.

“O my garden” says the gardener,/“how the mustard seed has grown!/so much more than I imagined,/now it crowds all I have sown.”

“**The Kingdom of God Grows Silently**” (lyrics by Joy Patterson, music by Amanda Husberg) likens the Kingdom to a mustard seed and to rising yeast. The third pictures the people of God watching eagerly for the Kingdom to appear. Here is the first stanza and chorus:

*The Kingdom of God grows silently, silently
like a small mustard seed grows in the earth,
sprouting and pushing its way toward day’s clarity
soon a plant tall as a tree comes to birth.*

*The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God
has come, and now is, and is coming to be
the Kingdom of God fulfills on the earth
God’s visions of justice and peace.*

And Jesus Said includes two Hidden Treasure songs, one Pearl of Great Price song, and one song about both parables. One of these was “**What Did You Find**” (AJS #26):

*What did you find while plowing this morning?
What did you find as you worked in the field?
What did I find? I found a great treasure,
and now I am going to buy the field. (stz 1)*

“**The Kingdom of Our God Is Like,**” from *Singing the New Testament* is set to ‘Dove of Peace’ and covers five Matthew 13 parables in five stanzas. Here is the Pearl of Great Price stanza:

*The kingdom of our God is like
a merchant who to own
the rarest pearl sells everything
to gain that pearl alone,
to gain that pearl alone.*

2. ART

Despite their provocative power, the parables from Matthew 13 seem less popular subjects than many other parables. Here are a few I found for each parable.

Mustard Seed

The first four pieces depict the mustard plant itself, first drawing attention to the lowly plant and then conveying the mustard plant's imaginative power.



Etching by Jan Luyken (Dutch, 1649-1712) illustrating the parable, from the Bowyer Bible



Denise Ho, *Mustard Tree*



Imre Szakács (Hungarian, 1948–), *Mustard Seed*, 2009

Here the image of the mustard plant is organic. It lives, moves, blows and bathes in the red-orange-yellow-golden light. It almost looks like a human lung with blood and air streaming through it, bringing life to the remotest places. Upon closer inspection, one sees birds and a nest in the branches. The mustard seed has matured and now gives room to other life. Life radiates from it. The seed sprouts and grows into branches interlaced with light. Out of and into the light grow these branches, nourished by the same source, nurtured by life-giving vertical and horizontal relationships. This painting inspired Anna Jókai, the grand lady of Hungarian literature, to write her story, "Togetherness," in which she deals with what gives meaning to life, with solidarity and comfort.



Mark A Hewitt, *Parable of the mustard seed growing into a large shrub*, 1999

Here the artist depicts the mustard shrub with a Superb Fairy Wren nesting in its shade.



Nicusor Dumitru (Romanian, 21st century),
Icon of the Parable of the Mustard Seed

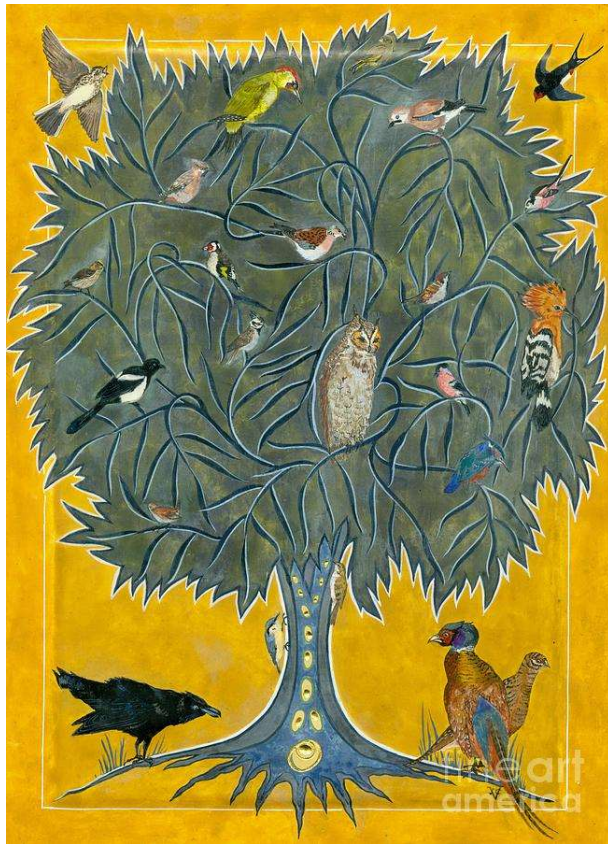
The following illustrations of the Mustard Seed parable focus on Jesus' claim that "the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."



Jorge Cocco Santángelo (Argentinean, 1936-), *Like a Grain of Mustard*, 2017

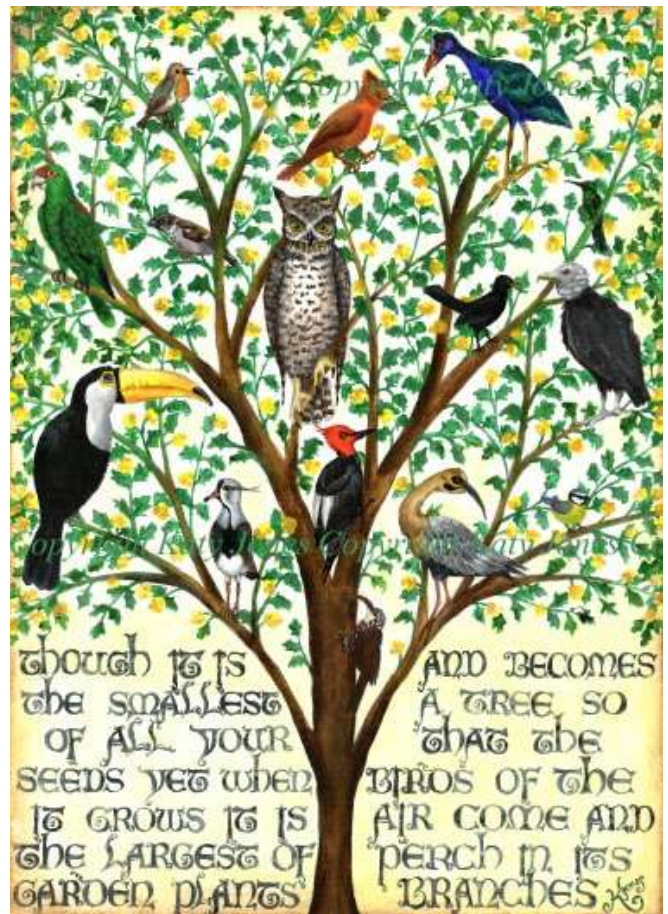


Nelly Bube (Kazakhstan, 1949-), *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*



Juliet Venter (British), *The Mustard Seed*, 2011

By including in the branches of the mustard “tree” a menagerie of birds, from a variety of continents and ecosystems, these artists connect this parable to Jesus’ great commission: “to make disciples of all nations.”



Katy Jones (British, 21st century), *Mustard Tree*, 2010



Lorna Effler Savizpour (American, 21st century),
The Mustard Seed, 1996

From the artist: “We are able to see the small beginning of this tree -- below in the fertile ground is the tiny mustard seed. All the birds taking rest are birds of the Bible. Sacrificial birds are the sparrow, swallow, pigeon, and the two turtledoves which Mary sacrificed to God after giving birth to Jesus. The white dove is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Quail, representing the quail God sent to the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness with Moses -- headed to the promised land, and the raven, symbolic of the raven God sent to feed Elijah as he sat under the Juniper tree. Notice the birds among the bottom branches represent Old Testament, the birds among the upper branches New Testament. This placement refers to the fact, the Old Testament came first, birthing the New Testament. The Old Testament foretells of Christ, New Testament fulfills this -- Christ is born resulting in a new covenant. The mustard tree is in bloom, its branches intertwined form a cross, with the white dove -- the Holy Spirit, at its center. This tree is watered by "living water"!”



Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *World's Smallest Seed, 2003*

Here the artist builds on the aviary symbols of good fortune (quite a collection of fowl, at that) and builds a small city around the base of the tree—including directions to a seed store. Might that be a church?



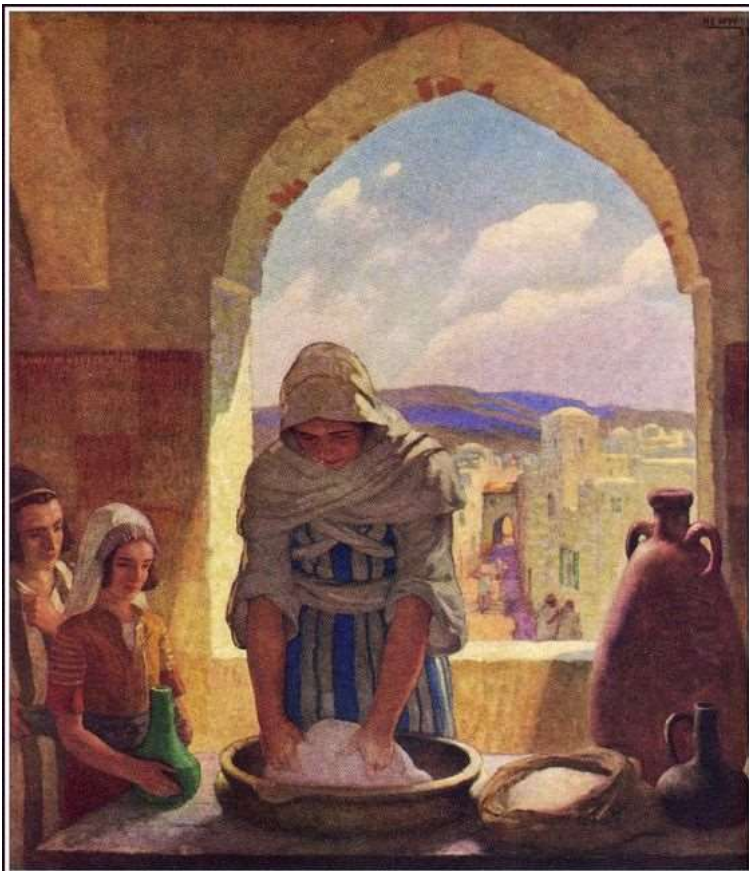
From the Jehovah's Witnesses book, *God's Kingdom Rules!*: "The parable of the mustard seed shows that lodging and protection are enjoyed by those in the Christian congregation"

Here the anonymous artist focuses on the birds that take refuge in the mustard bush, highlighting the creaturely community and their beauty by depicting them as songbirds.

Leaven



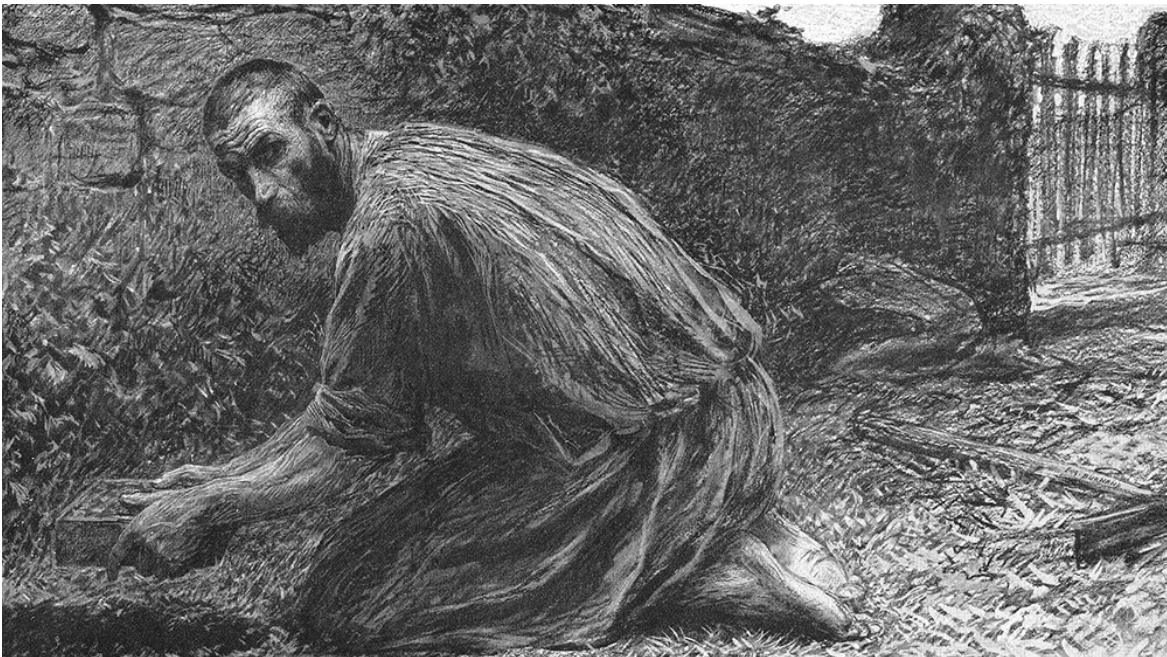
W. J. Webb (British, 1830-1894),
Parable of the Leaven



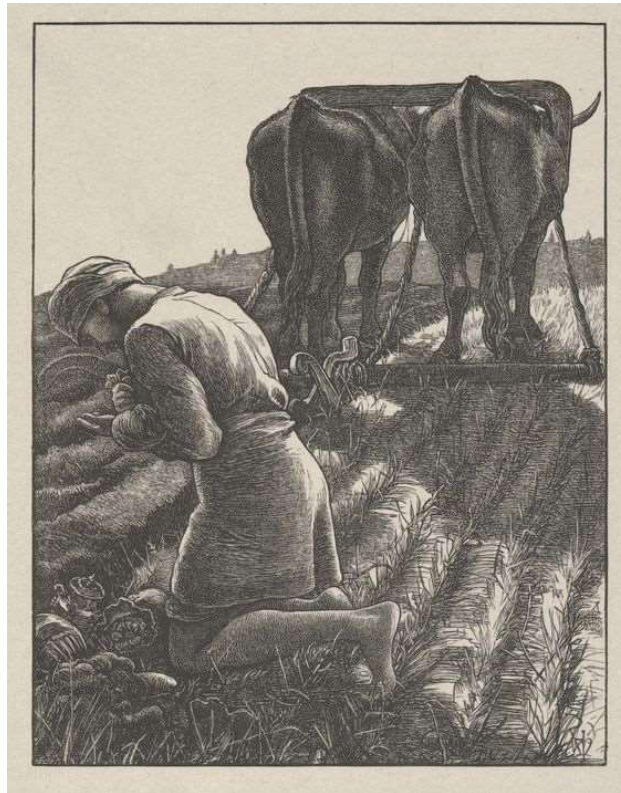
N. C. Wyeth, *The Parables of Jesus*, "The leaven," 1931



James Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *The Hidden Treasure (Le trésor enfoui)*, 1886-1894



Eugene Burtrand, (Swiss, 1850-1921), *Hidden Treasure 2*, 1908



After John Everette Millais, *The Hidden Treasure*
(The Parables of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ) 1864

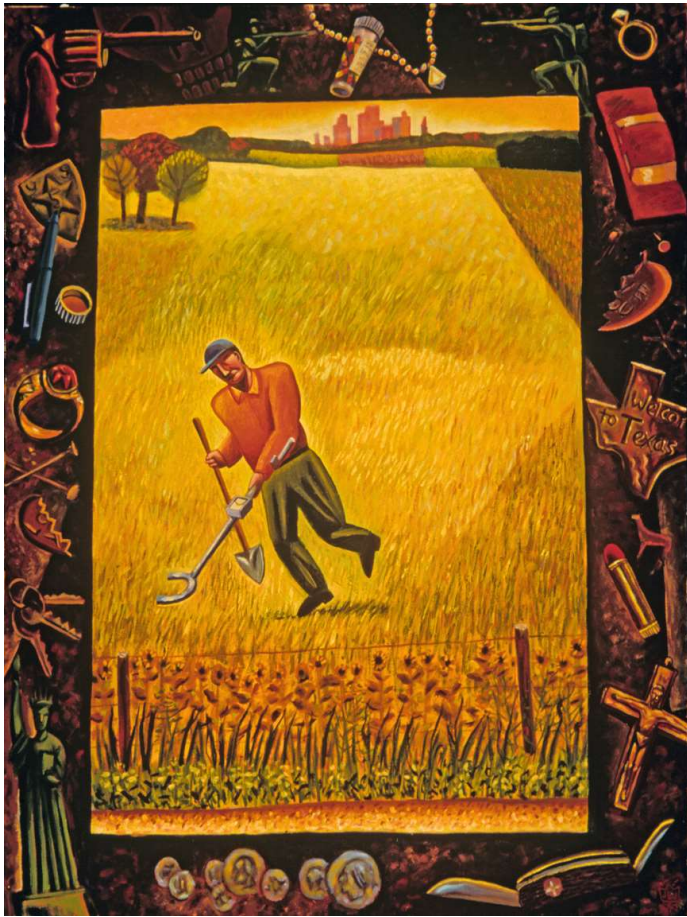


Parable of the Hidden Treasure, Jesus Mafa project, c1970

The Jesus Mafa paintings were produced in the 1970s in a collaboration between Mafa Christians in northern Cameroon and French missionaries. The paintings that resulted from this partnership were western in style, but depicted the Mafa and their environment accurately so that the Mafa could identify with the biblical stories being portrayed.

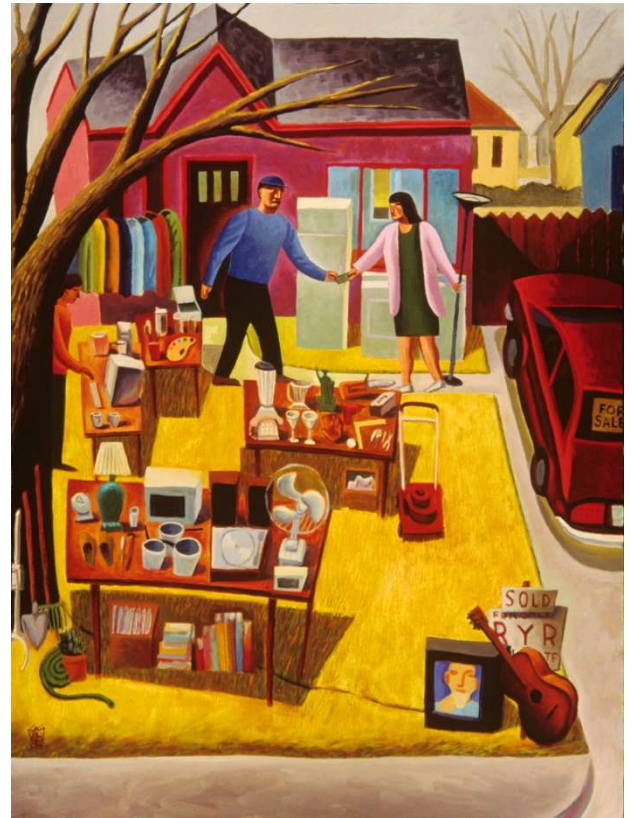


**Artist Unknown, Illustration of the Parable of the Hidden Treasure,
from “The Kingdom of God is Governing,” 2014**



Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *Treasure Field 1*

In this series of three paintings, the artist depicts the hidden treasure as resulting from a treasure hunter with a metal detector, a bargain shopper at a yard sale, and finally, a treasure hunter at picnic who delights in finding the “treasure” of Eucharistic bread and wine. The latter’s depiction is intriguing, bringing a new dimension to the parable and connecting the treasure to the new life embodied in sacramental living. Alternatively, the Eucharist (literally, “thanksgiving”) could represent the consequence of finding the treasure—joy and gratitude.



Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *Treasure Field 2*



Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *Treasure Field 3*

Pearl



Anonymous, 1900



Eugene Burtrand, (Swiss, 1850-1921), *Parable of the Pearl*, 1908



Dinah Roe Kendall (English, 1923-),
The Pearl of Great Price, 1992



Domenico Fetti (Italian, 1598-1623),
The Pearl of Great Price (detail), 17th century



Andrei Nikolaevich Miranov, *The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price*, 2020



Jorge Cocco Santángelo (Argentinian, b.1936), *Pearl of Great Price*, 2017



Vladimir Kush (Russian, b1965), *The Pearl*, 2016

Surrealist artist Kush makes the image of a pearl into a radiant sun and makes its container (an oyster shell) into a shelter or perhaps more evocatively a ship, in echo of the sailing vessel depicted in the distance. This image lends the allegory of the pearl of great price a more active significance, with the pearl not just something you possess, but something around which one lives one's life to the extent that it is with one as one journeys through life.

Net

Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *The Net*



In both of these illuminations of the Parable of the Dragnet, the artists unite the literal image (separating fish) with the spiritual judgment of the angels in the Endtimes.



Darlene Slavujac (American, 1943-), *Parable of the Net*, 2005



From the **Jehovah's Witnesses** book, *God's Kingdom Rules!*:
“The dragnet represents the Kingdom preaching that is taking place throughout the sea of humanity”