

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2023  
 “Kingdom Parables” (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52)

This is the third Sunday our gospel text has included parables from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. It seems that Matthew really wants to highlight Jesus in the role of teacher. And Jesus was a great teacher. His parables spoke to everyone in his audience and helped them understand divine things in new ways. The Greek word for parable is *parabole*, which literally means “thrown alongside”. Parables, then, are stories thrown alongside life, lifting up comparisons and contrasts between the world and faith, inviting the hearer to see and think in new ways.

The parables before us this morning all give us glimpses of the kingdom of heaven. But before we look at the parables, I want us to consider what Matthew means by *the kingdom of heaven*. He’s not talking about that place in the sky where, one day, we will live forever. Rather, he’s talking about God’s holy realm, the place where God dwells, which would include, but not be limited to, the earth in this present time. Jesus says at the beginning of the gospel, *The kingdom of heaven is at hand (or near)*. The kingdom of heaven is where God is present. So, let’s see how Jesus describes this kingdom.

The parables he uses in today’s text are arranged in pairs. The first pair, the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, tell of the kingdom’s growth. Jesus first tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed – the tiniest of all seeds – that grows into a bush so large that birds make their nests in its branches. He emphasizes that the kingdom begins as something small, but grows into something very large.

However, there’s a bit more to this parable. The mustard plant was considered a weed in Jesus’ day. We know how we feel about weeds, right? We don’t want them in our lawns or gardens, but we can’t seem to stop them. They are relentless. They pop up in unwanted places, unnoticed at first, and, before long, will spread and take over. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven has an explosive nature, just like the mustard seed. Not only does it begin as something small, and grows into something very large, but it spreads rampantly, mysteriously, and somewhat uncontrollably.

I like to imagine Jesus telling this parable for the benefit of his disciples. They would no doubt despair that their little band was so small and the world to which they were called was so wide. So Jesus encourages them to be the small beginning from which the kingdom will grow.

Jesus continues this theme with the parable of the yeast. Actually the word translated as *yeast* is more accurately translated as *leaven*. Yeast is a kind of leaven, which means they are both elements that encourage growth when used in the right way. The leaven used in Jewish homes was a lump of fermented dough left over from the last batch of bread (sort of like the starter for sour dough bread). Leaven was often compared to corruption. A little bit of corruption could quickly contaminate – sort of like the one bad apple spoiling the whole barrel. One practice for celebrating the Passover, you’ll remember, was to eliminate all leavening agents from the home.

In the parable, a woman mixes the leaven with flour. To add a little more mystery, the Greek word translated as *mixed* is more accurately translated as *hid*. So we have an agent of corruption

being concealed or purposely hidden in the flour. This image must have confused Jesus' hearers, but the point is that the leaven becomes so thoroughly a part of the loaf that it can no longer be detected, yet it completely animates the whole. Likewise, the kingdom may not always be seen, but it has the power to transform, and that transformative power is far reaching.

These two parables, then, show us that God's kingdom is everywhere, that it is not controllable nor easily stopped. The kingdom is unexpected, even unseen, but God is at work in the world even though we may fail to see it or perceive it.

The next pair of parables focuses on another aspect of the kingdom. They describe its value and the joy it brings. In the first parable, a man finds a treasure hidden in a field. Upon discovering it, he hides it again, then sells everything he has and buys the field.

In the ancient world, there were banks, but they weren't used by ordinary people. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most treasured belongings. (Think about another parable where one servant hid his talent in the ground. He was safeguarding it.) Additionally, Palestine was subject to become a battleground at any time. When war was threatened, it was a common practice for people to hide their valuables in the ground before they took to flight. Hopefully, the day would come when they could return and claim them.

In any event, a man is digging in a field that is not his own. Here again, there is the element of surprise. Does this mean the kingdom of heaven is like a trespasser? Not necessarily. The man could have been hired to do some work in that field. Does it mean the kingdom must be attained by dishonest means? After all, the man hid the treasure again, then bought the field. This action might seem a bit dubious to us. But Jesus' audience would have known that, according to Jewish law, finders of hidden treasure became the keepers of it. This man had a right to possess the treasure and could have simply walked away with it.

But the details are not important to Jesus. Parables usually have one main point; and what Jesus is stressing here is the joy of the discovery – a joy that made the man willing to give up everything else to make the treasure his own. Nothing else in the parable really matters.

Jesus follows this with a parable about a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he finds one of great value, like the man in the field, he sells everything to buy that pearl. In the ancient world, pearls were very special. People desired to possess a lovely pearl, not only for its monetary value, but for its beauty. There was great pleasure in simply holding and contemplating it, making the pearl the loveliest of all possessions. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is the loveliest of all possessions, and it is worth any sacrifice to enter it.

What does it mean to enter the kingdom? In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, *thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. The kingdom, then, is where God's will is done as perfectly as it is in heaven. Therefore, to enter the kingdom is to accept and do God's will. It is to give up certain aims and ambitions dear to us, to abandon certain habits and ways of life that are difficult to lay down, to take on a discipline and self-denial that are not easy. In short, to accept and do God's will is to take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is what brings peace of mind in this life and glory in the life to come.

Again, these parables lift up the value of the kingdom and the joy of attaining it. Whether we find it by surprise or after diligently seeking for it, the kingdom of heaven is worth everything we have to become its rightful owner.

So far, we have a pair of parables that show how the kingdom of heaven might seem small and insignificant in the beginning, but grows into something that can't be contained. And we have another pair that describes how valuable the kingdom of heaven is and the joy in discovering it. All four of these stories hint that the kingdom may be hidden from plain view for those who do not have eyes to see, or ears to hear.

Let's now consider the last set. Both of these parables are about judgment. They describe what happens to those who ignore Christ's message. Both speak of angels who will separate the righteous from the evil.

In the first parable, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a net thrown into the sea, catching fish of every kind. When it is full, it is drawn to shore, where the good and bad are separated. There were two main ways of fishing in ancient Palestine. The first was using the casting net. This type of fishing provides hours of fun for my twin grandsons when they visit the beach. They stand in the surf, looking for a school of fish, then throw the net wide to trap them. A cord allows them to draw the net closed and pull it to shore.

The second way of fishing was with the drag net (or trawling net). This is the way referred to in the parable. This net was a great square net with cords at each corner. It was weighted so that, at rest, it hung upright in the water. As the boat began to move, the net was drawn into the shape of a great cone and all kinds of fish were swept into it. The net was then drawn to land, where the catch was separated. The useless material – driftwood, seaweed, turtles, unwanted fish – was thrown away while fish for keeping were placed in containers.

The lesson in this parable is that the drag net does not and cannot discriminate. It draws in a mixture of things as it is pulled through the water. If we apply that to the church – which is the instrument of God's kingdom on earth – it means that the church is bound to be a mixture of all kinds of people, good and bad, useful and not useful. Because Christ died and rose for all – and not just people who look like we do or share the same values, beliefs, philosophies, and political leanings that we do – it is our duty to gather in all who will come, without discrimination.

Also notice that the fishermen don't haul in the net until it is full. This is both a universal and eschatological image. The fishermen don't make the absolute final judgment. The angels make a sudden appearance and arrange for the final disposition of the evil and righteous. Therefore, it is not for us to determine what is useful or not; not our job to judge and separate. The judgment is ultimately left to God and those angels who are directly in service to the kingdom at the consummation of the universe.

Now, we aren't really comfortable talking about God's judgment, are we? Stories of unquenchable fire, weeping, and the gnashing of teeth are a bit unsettling. Yet, as the kingdom of heaven grows in its fullness and value, evil must be pulled out from it and destroyed. Still, Jesus doesn't belabor this point. For every parable of judgment, he tells five parables about joy,

abundance, and treasure. His stories envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading dough to plowing fields. He transforms human life not by scaring people, but helping them see the nearness of heaven.

Seeing that heaven is close at hand, finding the hidden treasure of the kingdom, and devoting ourselves completely to it are all signs of discipleship. The parables of Matthew 13 are a call to follow Jesus into the kingdom of heaven.

When he finishes speaking about the kingdom, Jesus asks his disciples if they have understood. He wants to know if they have ears to hear and a heart that is open to understanding; if they are paying attention and letting the kingdom of heaven, which is already present and at work, change them. He wants to know if they are willing to be transformed and have their lives turned around 180 degrees. They respond *yes* – they hear and understand.

If we can join the disciples in responding, *yes*, Jesus has one more parable for us. He says that 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. A scribe was someone whose life was devoted to copying the words of scripture and teaching them to others. Like a scribe, the disciples come to Jesus with a fine heritage. They bring with them the instruction they have received and the knowledge they have gained in regard to the law and the prophets. Jesus has further trained them with knowledge that illuminates their previous learning.

Having been trained as a scribe for the kingdom of heaven, Jesus calls them to accept him as the new treasure, which fulfills the promise of the old scriptures, and to devote their lives to the truth of the gospel and sharing it with others. He offers us the same invitation. He invites us to bring who we are, what we have learned and experienced in life, and the varied gifts and abilities we possess, and allow these things to be illuminated by the gospel. When we see all that we are, all that we know, and all that we have experienced in a new light, the kingdom of heaven becomes an even greater treasure that will propel us into new and greater service.

These parables encourage us to abandon whatever we think is most important in life and focus entirely on what God is doing in the kingdom that is already here and active, working in us and changing us. The gospel we proclaim deserves the label of “treasure”. Therefore, our lives must express the ultimate value that is found only in Christ. Do we have ears to hear?