

Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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."

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; ⁴⁶on 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; 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.

⁵¹"Have 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." ⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Prayer.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus continues to teach his disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. He teaches in parables, inviting those who hear him to come to their own conclusions. Parables are vague by nature, designed to avoid a front-end impact with potential adversaries. Jesus often taught in parables to avoid a direct confrontation with the religious authorities in Jerusalem and the civil authorities in Rome; less they react before Jesus is prepared, and have him arrested and killed.

The risk Jesus makes by teaching with intentional vagueness is that of mis-

interpretation. Not everyone will draw the same conclusions from the same parable. Cultural backgrounds, values, and experience is different for everyone. How, then, the cynic asks, can any conclusions be drawn from the implied variability of Jesus' parables? Where is truth to be found?

The complexity of Jesus' parable talk is simplified greatly by a number of his intentional strategies. First, Jesus sticks to only a few subjects for his parables. He may have lots and lots of parables about the same topic – like our Kingdom parables for today – but the number of topics is purposefully reserved for his most important themes. This way the audience is encouraged to experience many parables about the same theme. When given sufficient room, Essential Truth can be discovered very effectively, by relating like parables together. I think of this as giving Essential Truths “color.”

Secondly, Jesus reserves parable talk only for his most vital, essential themes—for example forgiveness, love and compassion for God and neighbor, and the Kingdom of God. On minor issues or in an environment of privacy, Jesus speaks quite freely. He doesn't tell a parable to the woman at Jacob's well. Neither does he use a parable with the individuals he physically heals or for whom he casts out demons. I think of this as giving Essential Truths “depth.”

Finally, we find new meaning and expression from the parables of Jesus if we have a profound sensitivity to his nature, his character, his atonement and salvation. Jesus was one who challenged authority, reached out to the poor, the lost, the unclean, and the dispossessed. So do his parables. He was gracious and accepting without condition, lifting people from the circumstances they found themselves in – or placed themselves in. So do his parables.

Jesus was the only Son of God, both human and divine; when he speaks, his words are the words of the Divine. That makes these parables Essential Truths, gifts from God, and worthy of our complete attention. Finally, Jesus brings life; through sin, to redemption, by means of the cross – just like his parables – and from redemption to eternal life, by means of the empty tomb – just like his parables; just like today's parables of the Kingdom. I think of this as giving Essential Truths “character.”

So what color, how deep, and what character are today's parables of the Kingdom? What Essential Truths can be mined from their nuggets? What conclusions can be drawn?

We all know that two thousand years of waiting have required us to re-evaluate a messianic expectation for a final, second coming, and to consider the Kingdom of God as not a future possibility, but rather as a past, present, and future

unfolding reality. The Kingdom of God has come, is come, and will come again. We affirm this each time we unify our voices in the litany, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again." We acknowledge this every time we recognize the fact that all there is - is a creation of God; we are God's children, this is God's world, and God is even yet coming to final victory and glory. It is inevitable; it is God's revealing reality.

So instead of talking about some future event, allow our talk about the Kingdom of God make us consider God's Kingdom that is already here.

What about these specific parables of the Kingdom for today?

I believe we have 5 parables with 4 elements of Truth in today's carefully selected Lectionary texts.

Let's take a look at the first one in Matthew 13, verses 31 and 32. Jesus tells his disciples "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" The small mustard seed is sown into a field where it grows into a tree (v.31-32). The logical conclusion that can be drawn is that the apparent size of the Kingdom of Heaven right now has nothing to do with the fullness that it is bound to become.

There are a lot of preachers, scholars, believers and followers who think they know just about all there is to know about God's Kingdom. And it's not just limited to Christianity. They range from the outrageous – "just strap some plastic explosives around yourself, son, and go walk into a crowd of people; paradise awaits you" – to the arrogant - "there's only 144,000 getting in, and I'm one of them, and you are not" - to the self-serving - "break off all ties with family, sign your bank accounts and house over to me, drink some kool-aid, and together we'll be in paradise." Some will baptize the dead and grant deification to only the males. Others will attempt to literally "scare the hell out of you" or try to tell you how you can simply earn your way into heaven. Don't believe a word of it!

The truth of the matter is that all anyone knows is equivalent to the smallest possible seed. Jesus tells us about that mustard seed, and how it becomes a great bush or tree. In other words, as the lyrics of a secular song goes - we've ain't seen nothing yet!

The second parable of the Kingdom is about yeast. Jesus uses yeast as his metaphor. Yeast mixed in with three measures of flour makes all of the dough leavened (Matthew 13:33). If it's mixed well, the yeast goes everywhere throughout the batter. The yeast yields Carbon-dioxide gas, which is released as tiny bubbles that makes the bread light and uniform, when allowed to warm, rise and then baked.

This tells me that it is possible for today's Kingdom of Heaven to be spread everywhere. Not just among Christians. Certainly beyond Jews and Islam. To all the corners of creation, to every part of the dough, God has spread the yeast. It may not be risen or baked yet – the Kingdom isn't complete as of yet – but the Divine plan has been implemented, and it will encompass all, everyone and everywhere, throughout all creation.

The next two parables are linked together by a common theme; finding something valuable, then risking everything to obtain it. A treasure hidden in a field, when found, is worth selling everything to purchase that field, and thus becoming the owner of the treasure. And a pearl of great value, when found, is worth selling everything in order to buy it up (v.44-45).

These two parables of the Kingdom do cause most of us some sense of dis-ease because the treasure is obtained by questionable means. It isn't lying, but it isn't being forthcoming with information, either. If the owner knew the true value, there wouldn't be a sale.

When measured by the criteria of similar parables, the life and actions of Christ, and by the consistence Essential Truth of the Gospel, I believe Jesus is pointing us in the direction of ... the Kingdom of God is so important that it is worth risking everything to make sure you're a part of it. God Kingdom is more valuable than money, more important than your house, job, or family. The Kingdom of God is, as the great 20th Century theologian Paul Tillich used to say, of "Ultimate Concern" to the disciple of Jesus.

There is no greater concern than living for the Kingdom.

Which leads us to the fourth and final theme for today from our parables of God's Kingdom. Jesus tells his disciples that just like a net catches all, so too does the Kingdom of God, that all might be judged, and those deemed unacceptable will be destroyed (v.47-50).

Those that live in denial of the present Ultimate Concern, who have no faith in the One who is both the Alpha and the Omega, are those who be found unacceptable. Cast out. Tossed into the fire. Annihilated, and every memory erased.

Again, I know this illusion of ire, weeping, and gnashing of teeth is one that we would like to deny or ignore and hope that it goes away. But the fact remains, God is the final judge, in a system that has no appeals. This should serve as a corrective warning, a gentle, yet deliberate directive for everyone of us to seek a

relationship of faith and love with our God, and with Jesus the Son. As evident last Sunday, be assured, all of us who live lives of faith, that we have nothing to fear in God's final judgment. It is God's good choice to save, to protect, to gather in all His children.

So, today, God's Kingdom has come just a little closer, has made a little more of an inroad into our lives, has become a little more clear. By these gems given to us by Jesus, we know that the apparent size of the Kingdom of Heaven right now has nothing to do with the fullness that it is bound to become. We know the Kingdom isn't complete as of yet – but the Divine plan has been implemented, and it will encompass all, everyone and everywhere, throughout all creation. We know the Kingdom of God is so important that it is worth risking everything to make sure we're a part of it. And we know, that just like a net catches all, so too does the Kingdom of God, that all might be judged, and those deemed unacceptable will be destroyed.

There is danger and opportunity in today's parables of the Kingdom. Be sure you steer clear of the danger. But, be also sure you seize the opportunity.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.