

Weekend of Sunday, July 26, 2020
8th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 17/Proper 12/Year A
First Reading: 1 Kings 3:5-12
Second Reading: Romans 8:26-39
Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Sermon Title: “A Kingdom of Justice and Mercy”

Theme

Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Jesus and his disciples proclaim the good news that “the kingdom of heaven is near!” Here, Jesus offers several brief parables that explore the implications of this announcement for people’s lives.

Text

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;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.”

Sermon

Today's Gospel Reading is a quick series of six parables (a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a pearl of great value, a fishing net, and a treasure new and old) in which Jesus illustrated what the *kingdom of heaven is like*.

I alluded to this notion last week, but I would like to re-address it again this week. And that is that in these parables, Jesus said this is what the *kingdom of heaven is like*. In other words, it is not some far off distant concept that we have to die to see it manifested. Christians are charged with co-creating the kingdom of heaven with Christ in the present, in the here and now.

Bible and Theological scholars agree that the *kingdom of heaven* and the *kingdom of God* are synonymous terms and represent a key element of Jesus' teachings. I think the term, *kingdom of heaven*, emphasizing the word *heaven* throws us off because we think of it as what awaits us – that place where God will dwell with us and all things will be complete and perfect as God created it – a return to Eden. And while that is true, we don't have to wait until the end of this age to see it. And that is what is at the heart of these parables.

Mustard Seed

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. I don't know a lot about mustard, but I have learned that the type of mustard Jesus would have been talking about is black mustard and not the white mustard that we grow to convert to the condiment, mustard. White mustard is a relatively small plant growing to about two feet tall. Black mustard, on the other hand, is a plant that grows wild in the Middle-East and will grow to a height of nine feet. That may be a great shrub, but it does not become a tree, as Jesus said it would. So what Jesus meant by this parable is that the kingdom of heaven is made of the common stuff of creation but is surprising in its usefulness, helpfulness, and effectiveness.

When I think about the life of the church and the life of the disciple, this is how we ought to be. Rather ordinary in appearance, but when empowered by the Holy Spirit we do extraordinary things.

Yeast

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. I am no baker, but I know the bread we enjoy, like a loaf of bread for sandwiches, is light and airy. But unleavened bread like the flatbread we used to use in Holy Communion and the wafers we currently use are flat and denser because they have no yeast. Yeast is a single-celled fungus that is worked into the bread dough until it is thoroughly mixed. What it does is eats sugar and excretes carbon dioxide, the gas that causes bread to be light and airy. Dough made with yeast starts as a relatively small ball and then swells into a large ball that often overflows the bowl it's in.

When Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like yeast he meant that one or two people can be exposed to the Gospel and then they tell the Good News to others and they become affected and before you know it, there is a larger group of people all of whom are impacted by the Good News of the Gospel. And then all those Christians go about living out their lives of discipleship impacting their community and all benefit. When this happens (i.e., like feeding the hungry, helping with utilities, marching against racism, or better yet, fellowshiping with NBOM) we can see the kingdom of heaven.

Hidden Treasure & Pearl of Great Value

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure that someone found and a pearl of great value. These two parables seem similar to me. In each case, an object of great value has been discovered and the discoverer sold out all he had to acquire that one thing. Don't overlook the irrationality of the parable – that is exactly the point. No sane person would do this. But the kingdom of heaven is of such great value that when one finds it, it can become the all-consuming focus of one's life. Now I will not say that my life of discipleship is the all-consuming focus of my life, but as a pastor, it is a big part of my life. Your life of discipleship should be a big part of your life too.

Fishing Net

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a fishing net. As we are probably all aware, fishing with a net is indiscriminate – it catches everything in its path, both the fish that are worth catching and also fish that are considered worthless. After gathering in the net with its catch, the fishermen sort the fish and keep the good ones and throw out the bad. In this particular parable, Jesus told us the meaning.

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.

The meaning of this parable, according to Jesus, is unsettling but true never the less. While liberal theologians like to say that "if there is a hell, it is empty," wouldn't you agree that Jesus has the ultimate insight into these things and he has a completely different message here in this parable.

Not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is a Christian. In many European countries, for example, one is simply presumed to be born Christian unless otherwise specified, and yet a person can live out their entire life never practicing their faith. If you are listening to my voice then it is unlikely you are one of those Christians in name only. And while I don't want it to be perceived as a threat, why would you leave your eternal destiny in question? If you consider yourself a Christian, ask yourself if there is any evidence of that. No amount of good works will get you into heaven, but why would a Christian not try to emulate our Lord Jesus and be about doing good works? Jesus said this is what the kingdom of heaven is like – now!

Treasure New and Old

Finally, Jesus said

⁵²“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.”

This is actually not a parable at all, but a metaphor, the difference being that Jesus is not trying to illustrate a greater truth as he does in parables, but is using metaphor to describe the worth of a scribe who is both learned in the scripture and theology of the Old Testament and Judaism, and who can also accept him (Jesus) as the *object* of the Old Testament, and apply what the scribe knows to his (Jesus') teachings. The Jewish New Testament Commentary said this about the scribe Jesus described, he is "providing rich soil for bringing forth Yeshua (Jesus) grain."

(Jewish New Testament Commentary)

And while Jesus was truly talking about scribes in his day, wouldn't it be wonderful if that was said about us. The living out of our lives of discipleship has provided rich soil for bringing forth Jesus grain.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So as I already said at the beginning of this sermon, we aren't supposed to sit back and wait until the end of this age to see the kingdom of heaven. Being that Jesus taught that it is like a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a pearl of great value, a fishing net, a treasure new and old, we should see the kingdom of heaven as a process whereby God's creation and human beings specifically are involved in bringing all creation under the rule and leadership of God, or as I said at the beginning, Christians are charged with co-creating the kingdom of heaven with Christ in the present, in the here and now.

About the kingdom of heaven, none of us should say, "No, I don't see it." because we are the ones called to bring it. Therefore, if we can't see it, it's our fault!

I suppose it could be said that the kingdom of heaven is what we make it to be in our day. This may be true, but that doesn't make it complete and perfect. Only God revealed in Jesus Christ can make that happen. That day will come, and it will be ushered in by Jesus Christ. Until that day, every Christian ought to be about bringing it, here and now.

Prayer

Beloved and sovereign God, through the death and resurrection of your Son you bring us into your kingdom of justice and mercy. By your Spirit, give us your wisdom, that we may treasure the life that comes from Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen