

Sunday, July 26, 2020
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 (Year A)

Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/624228538214775>

(Sermon begins at about 14:50)

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like . . .”

Today’s Gospel reading is a series of five parables, which is actually part of a longer series of seven parables—the first two of which we heard the last two weeks, along with their explanations. This series has a common theme: “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” While the first two—the ones we heard the last two weeks—were much longer and more detailed, the ones we hear today are much shorter. Despite their brevity, they contain a wealth of information. It’s worth taking a critical look at these five parables to determine what truths they hold. Not only to provide us with an image of what God’s kingdom will be like in its fullness, but what it might take to help us get there.

The first parable, the parable of the mustard seed, conveys the idea that, at present, the kingdom of heaven may seem small, even imperceptible. As such, it may appear to have little impact in the world. That can certainly seem to be the case as we look around us these days. Where do we see the kingdom of heaven—how do we see the kingdom of heaven—in our own day? Amid a global pandemic in which every day more and more people are diagnosed with this insidious disease; that sees more and more people dying every day. Amid social unrest in response to systems of oppression that favor some at the expense of others; as some of our brothers and sisters cry out for the basic respect and dignity that God desires—that God commands—for all his beloved children. Amid economic turmoil that robs some of their livelihood and means of survival. Amid corrupt government officials who care more for their own self-interests at the expense of those they are elected to serve. Amid increased environmental degradation that, if left unchecked, will result in the extinction of more and more of God’s creatures, humanity included.

But in time, as the parable assures us, the kingdom of heaven will grow and increase. Like the mustard seed, it will grow exponentially. From the smallest of seeds will grow the greatest of trees. The kingdom will be as a life-sustaining tree as the reign of God grows and is established throughout the world. Growing to be a means of shelter and support for all of God’s beloved creation. Growing to be a place, a way of being, that will restore all of creation, humanity included, to what God created it to be in the first place.

The second parable, the parable of the yeast, conveys a similar idea about the growth of the kingdom of heaven. That the kingdom is at work even now and will grow over time. This is not just about the inevitable growth of the kingdom, but also something about how it will grow. Just as yeast is hidden within the dough, there is also something hidden within this mini parable: something about yeast itself. In Jesus’ time and culture, “yeast was considered contaminating and corrupting.” The presence of the yeast is intended to convey something

about how the kingdom of heaven will grow. That “God’s empire will contaminate cultural norms like Rome’s empire, hierarchy, patriarchy, injustice.”¹ Slowly but surely, just as yeast permeates the dough and results in expansion, God’s ways of love and justice and mercy will grow, infiltrating, permeating, the culture around us. Bringing about a change in the very structure of society itself, just as yeast results in a change in the structure of dough. And just as yeast transforms the simple ingredients of flour and water from a lump of sticky goo into delicious, nutritious, and life-giving bread, so too will God’s love and justice and mercy bring about the transformation of our current systems and structures into something nurturing and life-giving.

These first two parables focus on the present nature of the kingdom of heaven as compared with what it ultimately will be. That it is currently small, even imperceptible at times, yet with the potential and the promise for becoming something greater. Something that will have a far greater impact on the lives of God’s people and all of creation. In the next two parables, Jesus shifts his emphasis from the kingdom itself to the individual’s encounter with and experience of God’s kingdom.

The third and fourth parables, the parable of the treasure hidden in a field and the parable of the pearl of great price, like the first two, share a common theme. That the kingdom of heaven is like a much sought-after treasure. Something of great value that is to be cherished above all else. This is characterized by searching, the joy of finding, and the willingness to sacrifice and set aside everything else, including disrupting daily life and priorities, to obtain the treasure that is the kingdom of heaven. As those who follow Christ, we know something of what can and will be. Jesus has told us what can and will be. Jesus himself has paved the way through his own ministry, and through the sacrifice of his own life. He has shown us there is a better way. A way founded upon God’s ways, not our ways. We do not need to search. Jesus has shown us what is waiting. And this, of course, brings great joy. It is something that we long for above all else. And we willingly do our part, having been called to be God’s hands and heart in helping to bring his kingdom to its fullness.

Our work in helping to realize the kingdom is not always easy. We were born into a culture with a particular way of doing things, with a particular way of being. Ways of being and doing things that are not always consistent with God’s ways. Our calling is to take a different approach, to follow a different path. We, too, must be willing to sacrifice what is comfortable for the sake of the hard work of living according to God’s ways. We must be willing to disrupt our daily lives as we seek opportunities to engage in God’s work. We must be willing to reorient our priorities to be less focused on self and more focused on love of God and love of neighbor. We must be willing to demonstrate those reoriented priorities not just in word, but in action. Not just in an occasional act of kindness, but in all areas of our lives.

In the fifth parable, the parable of the net and the great catch of fish, Jesus again shifts his focus. This time back to the future establishment of the kingdom of heaven. Again, there is the theme of great abundance parallel to that of the first two parables. That all are invited into what God has to offer in the kingdom of heaven. But just because all are invited does not mean that all are prepared for what the kingdom entails. As in using dragnets for fishing, all sorts are gathered in, the good and the bad. That the good and the bad ultimately need to be separated.

Is Jesus talking about separating good people from bad people? The righteous from the evil? Is he talking about letting some into heaven and sending others to hell—the “furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 13.50)? This implies some sort of eternal damnation. Or at least, that’s how it is generally interpreted.

To be honest, I have a really hard time with this notion of eternal damnation. If God is all loving and all merciful, as we claim him to be; if Jesus died for our sins so they are forgiven—so that we are forgiven—as we claim; how can there be eternal damnation? I’m not saying that I don’t believe that there will not be some sort of judgement. Some sort of reckoning for sins we have committed in this life. But eternal damnation? That’s not the God I believe in. That’s not the God I know and choose to follow. No, I think Jesus is really talking on two levels here. That yes, there will be some sort of personal judgment. Because even though there is forgiveness and salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection, that does not eliminate personal responsibility. I have to believe that there is hope. Hope that even to the last, there is still a possibility for change. That there is a possibility to seek repentance, to turn around, and to be justified in God’s eyes.

But aside from the personal judgment at the end of the ages, Jesus is also indicating a more systemic form of judgment. One that is ongoing as part of the establishment of the kingdom of heaven. That the kingdom of heaven when brought to its fullness—as it is being brought to its fullness—will entail a radical purging of the systems and structures that are contrary to God’s ways of love and mercy and justice. Bringing the kingdom of heaven to its fullness will necessitate such a radical purging. That all those things that separate us and oppress some to the benefit of others will be eliminated, as if cast into a furnace of fire. And yes, there will be those who will weep and gnash their teeth over this because they have selfishly benefited from such systems of oppression and injustice, and are not willing or able to recognize that in God’s kingdom, all are equal, all are loved, all are respected. This will be a necessary part of establishing God’s kingdom, which will have to be an ongoing process as we move forward to our goal.

Jesus ends our Gospel for today by asking his disciples, “‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes’” (Mt 13.51). They have been trained for this, for living into God’s kingdom. They have been trained to help in the building of God’s kingdom. “They understand and live the way of life of alternative practices that it creates, and anticipate its triumphant future.”²

Hopefully, we also are able to echo the response of the disciples—that we understand what the kingdom of heaven is like, and even more importantly, that we understand our part in living into that future reality. It is not always easy work. At times, it can be frustrating. At times, it might even seem impossible. But what we need to remember, particularly when the work seems frustrating or even impossible, is that we do not do this alone. It is really God who does the work. He just uses us to further his purposes. In this, our Collect of the Day expresses great wisdom: “O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal . . .”

“That, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal.” May this be our constant prayer as we continue the work God has given us to do in preparing for and helping to bring the kingdom of heaven to fruition.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1770.

² *Ibid.*, 1771.