



“Parables”

Text: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

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Parables. They are a great vehicle for getting a message across in a way that people will remember. In most of the parables that Jesus told in Matthew, there would be an explanation of the parable that would follow. The disciples didn't have to figure out what the lesson was, because Jesus told them; which was good, because sometimes they weren't too swift in catching on.

In the parables that we heard this morning, there is no follow-up explanation. We are left to figure it out on our own. And I wondered, as I read these parables anew, how much we miss in these parables that are all too familiar because we have come to hear them in just one way. They've become static and too often fall on deaf ears instead of bringing life and hope.

Jesus starts these parables with, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” a farmer who planted in his field a mustard seed. He goes on to say that “the kingdom of heaven is like...” a baker woman who puts a little yeast in the flour, which becomes enough bread to feed a large crowd. How is the kingdom of heaven like a farmer and a mustard seed or a baker woman with yeast baking bread?

I think the answer is to be found in what happens to that mustard seed and to that flour with the yeast. The mustard seed becomes a huge plant; but it becomes more than that. I don't know much about mustard plants, but I read that they grow and spread quickly, like a weed. It can quickly take over the land it has been planted on. And, as it tells us in the Scripture, it becomes like a tree, so large that the birds of the air come and perch on it. The birds symbolize the people of the nations who have lived under oppression. It is the same with the yeast in the flour.

There are three things that strike me about these first two parables. The first is that an action is taken. The farmer sowing and the baker woman putting yeast in the flour. The seed is so tiny it can barely be seen and when it is in the dirt, until it starts to grow, one wouldn't even know it was there. The same with the yeast in the flour. It just takes a little bit, and when blended with the flour cannot even be seen. Yet these small things, these unseen things, end up producing big results.

Too often we are looking for the kingdom of heaven on earth and can't see it, but it is still here. What God has set in motion, what God is doing to make manifest God's kingdom on earth is happening, but often times we have trouble seeing it. I think that comes from a couple of places. One being that we live too much in what we can see and hear and touch. The reality of global warming, of mass shootings, of poverty, of racial or gender discrimination is what we know. We can lose hope because of the onslaught of the terrible news. "Where is God in all this?", some might ask; but God is here and the Kingdom of heaven is here. It may be just below the surface where we can't see. It may be mixed up in other things that we don't notice, but that doesn't mean that God isn't at work growing the kingdom right now and right here. Our eyes and our minds become stuck on what we see as reality, but there is always more going on than meets the eye.

I have had many patients and parishioners over the years wonder where God is in various situations of their lives. It is understandable to question where God is, but faith is hope and belief in the things we cannot see. In Hebrews 11 the author writes: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen." In these parables we are told to believe that the kingdom of heaven is here, even if we cannot see it at this moment. Things are not as they seem. The kingdom is growing and will be made manifest to us in time.

The second thing that I believe we are being told in these parables is that the kingdom of heaven is both seen and unseen. The problem with the seen part is that it is in the ordinary. We may not recognize it because it is mixed up in other things, like in the flour. We have to ask God for eyes to see the Kingdom of heaven. I think that when we are told to rejoice always and in everything give thanks for this is the will of God, there is purpose to this. When we rejoice and give thanks in all things then it makes it a little easier to see the kingdom of heaven.

The other evening I stumbled upon a video of a man interviewing an elderly woman who was a survivor of Auschwitz. At one point the man looked at the numbers tattooed on her wrist and asked her if that was a burden for her, a constant reminder of what she had been through. Her response surprised me. She said, "No, those numbers meant life. The ones who didn't get numbers were put right into the gas chambers. When I got my numbers, I knew there was hope that I would live and I did. I am grateful for those numbers." She had stated that her mother had gone straight into the gas chambers and she had lost other relatives in the camps. But for her the numbers represented life and hope.

When I was in college I had the opportunity to meet Eli Weisel, the holocaust survivor who wrote *Night*. My professor was friends with him. Before we went to New York for the lecture, she told us more about his personal journey to faith and hope after surviving the camp. She said for years he vowed never to have children. He wouldn't bring a child into a world where humans could treat other humans so cruelly. And yet, by the time I met him, he had become a father by choice. She talked about his transformation to seeing humanity as more good than evil, and he came to affirm life, affirm God, affirm hope through bringing a new life into this world. The kingdom of heaven is there - in the unseen, in the ordinary, in numbers on a wrist.

The third thing these first two parables tell us is that action is involved. God is both farmer and baker woman, sowing seeds, mixing yeast into the flour; but we are also to be the farmer and baker woman. We are called to live lives of action, working to sow and mix into the world God's love; but more than that. We were never meant to live static lives but dynamic lives that are constantly mixing things up, upending things as the farmer does when he tills the land. The land wasn't meant to be dormant but to be dug into and turned over. The yeast could only work if it was well mixed into the flour. And that is what we are called to do, like those freedom riders and all who participated in the civil rights movement, the youth who came out of Parkland starting a guns regulation student movement, the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter. We are to be shakers and movers - stirring things up.

The parables that come next: the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure found in a field and the man sold all that he had to buy the field; and the merchant who is looking for fine pearls and when he finds one of great value, he sold everything he had to buy it, show us that the kingdom of heaven is priceless. God's love is

priceless, The promises we are given are priceless and all that we possess is nothing in comparison. Would you sacrifice everything you had, all your worldly possessions for the kingdom of God?

Unless we realize that things are not what they seem to be and that they will not be as they are forever - as the yeast and the mustard seed reveal - one will miss what matters most - the pearl, the treasure - and substitute a god of lesser value and meaning. People can gain the whole superficial world and yet lose their own souls.

As one commentator put it: "Because Jesus believes that one cannot serve God and mammon, or God and anything else for that matter, he proclaims the one thing needful. His teachings consistently reveal that the heavenly trumps the earthly, that the future will trump the present, and that we are surrounded by empty and dangerous distractions. To choose the pearl of great price or to dig up the treasure hidden in a field is to obey Jesus' imperative not to "store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be. Jesus urges us to cast aside all but the single-minded pursuit of what should be our ultimate concern..."

And how does he do that? Persuaded that the true nature of things is not obvious, Jesus sets out, in word and deed, to fracture the hypnotic hold of life-as-it-has-always-been. He seeks to shift our attention, to alter our perception, to expand our awareness, to change our behavior. Because he sanctions not the world as it is (where the kingdom is obscure) but only the world as it should be, when the kingdom will be all in all; he dislikes the default setting of our ordinary consciousness, whose defect is precisely that it accepts the present world as the real world. He is disconcerted that we see without seeing and fail to strive to enter through the narrow gate and that we are so wedded to everyday life and find so much comfort in material things and the unstable circumstances of fleeting lives. So Jesus constructs these parables, in the hope that we might begin to ponder soberly God's reign, and perhaps even to seek it, and perhaps even to seek it above all else."

May we be movers and shakers and may we seek the kingdom of heaven above all else. Amen.