Rev. Darren L. Paulson

St. John’s United - Director of Pastoral Care

Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 2023

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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.”

Friends, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Whenever I travel, conversations with the locals often lead to the question, “Where are you from?” Of course, the answer is, “I’m from Montana!” For those who have never been here, there’s a familiarity with this place. They’ve heard about it, maybe seen films set in this location, or have met others who have visited or perhaps even lived here. But that familiarity often leads to the next question, “Montana… what’s it like?”

How would you describe what it’s like living in Montana? What descriptive language would you use? Would you describe the varied landscape, talk about the economy, chronicle the ancient or modern history, capture the values and customs of this place, or characterize the people who live here? What stories or metaphors would you use to talk about this place that somehow shapes and defines who we are?

As Jesus traveled in his ministry, he would talk about the place that he was from, the place that has shaped and defined him – the Kingdom of Heaven. As people were invited into his ministry, experienced his compassion, witnessed the healings, and were transformed by his teaching, they got curious about this Kingdom of Heaven. “What’s it like? Who lives there? Describe what life in this Kingdom is like.”

Most often, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven with easy-to-understand earthly examples. Relatable images that are deeply impactful. But the power of his parables were not that they were simple to understand, rather they perplexed them, made them curious, intrigued them, and gathered the masses to learn more.

I’ve found that the best sermons that I’ve preached are ones that would get the congregation talking. People would leave wanting to know more, wanting to more deeply understand – feeling challenged, inspired, or even provoked. Sometimes sermons that people didn’t like – or even offended them – I would find some satisfaction in (after all, that was the reaction to most of the Old Testament prophets, and even Jesus himself!) They would be sermons that led to deeper conversations with one another, and – better yet – deeper conversations with the Divine. Jesus’ teaching and preaching drew people closer to him to talk and learn more about this “Kingdom of Heaven.”

So Jesus tells story after story, image after image, one metaphor after another to answer their questions “What’s it like?” So he says… A field. A pearl. A net. A small seed. A fungus known as yeast. And often, the parables flip conventional wisdom on its head.

* Let the weeds and the wheat grow together. (What kind of farmer would do THAT?!)
* Re-bury a treasure and then buy the field. (That seems odd!)
* Trading everything we’ve got for a little pearl. (Doesn’t seem practical to me!)
* Small is big.
* Worthless is priceless.

These parables reveal that the Lord does not think like we do. Or our thinking is not how the Lord thinks. So we ask more questions – which really is the point. Our loving, heavenly Father wants us to know him better. To understand the divine. “God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong, and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are…” (1 Cor. 1). A baby born in the small town of Bethlehem to an unwed mother. Humble beginning. A man who died among the criminals on a cross. Humble to the end.

The way that Jesus described the Kingdom of Heaven invites us to recognize that the Kingdom of Heaven is all around us, in the common, the ordinary, and the unpretentious. However, our challenge is to see the Kingdom of Heaven with God’s eyes. All too often our world looks for the Kingdom in glorious and grand events. All too often, too many actually wonder what the Lord is doing. World is a mess. Our lives are messy. Why isn’t God helping?

Last week, Jesus told the parable about the weeds in the wheat, and the servants doubted the credibility of the Landowner, “Didn’t you plant good seed?” The question posed to the Landowner is the answer demanded from God for the troubles of this world. “Are you in charge of this world or not? Can’t you control the bad? Explain yourself. Show yourself. Reveal Your glory. Your power. That’s the kind of Kingdom we long for.” But not God.

The prophet Elijah had the same thoughts. The Lord took him to a mountain. “After the wind came an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a soft, whispering voice” (1 Kings 9). Elijah knew the Lord was in the “soft, whispering voice”. The Lord still speaks to us. Whenever we read scripture, the Lord opens our ears to hear. Opens our hearts to believe. Our souls to understand more clearly His word. His voice.

So today, we gather with the crowds of old and we listen to Jesus’ stories about this Kingdom of God. As we hear images and metaphors of “What is it like?” we are drawn closer to one another as we discuss and discern what this may mean. If you didn’t get the point of Jesus parables, spend time talking with each other over coffee. If the sermon piqued your imagination, or somehow troubled you, engage with your other brothers and sisters in Christ.

Because beneath it all, it is through imperfect, earthly, sinful and forgiven communities just like this where we are drawn closer to God as we tune our ears to listen to the Lord. It’s not easy in our increasingly fast-paced society. We want our words, our thoughts to be heard. Listening doesn’t come easily to us – it never has, as James reminds us, “Remember this, my dear brothers and sisters: Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1). What a beautiful description of us – “brothers and sisters in Christ.” And what a gracious calling that we have – “being quick to listen.” As a matter of fact, that’s how Jesus often concluded his parables – “Let anyone with ears… listen!”

I admit, that I am not doing very well in that area lately. I have become too quick to speak. Too quick to be angry. It is tolerated to be intolerant in our society. Lord, give us patience to listen. To be slow to speak or become angry. People are looking for people to listen. Be quick to listen. Be humble servants. Be residents in this Kingdom of Heaven who live in this place in a way that makes others curious, and ask “What’s it like?” And then we’ll discover anew how to draw others closer to this community in Christ – and invited deeper into a relationship with our Lord and Savior. Amen