

*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

July 30, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Sam Wolff

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52)

[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it 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.”

He 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.”

“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.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And 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.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

If you ask a child, “What is heaven like?” they’d possibly say, “Well, the place where there’s lots of candy and I can eat as much as I want.” Or they might say, “Well, heaven is everywhere,” or “Heaven is being with God.” I asked a Sunday School teacher once, I said, “What do you tell the children when they ask you what heaven is like?” And she said, “I tell them to go talk to the pastor.”

It’s interesting that Jesus answers this question today. But he doesn’t use words like “love,” or “wonderful,” or “perfect,” or “everywhere,” or “candy.” Instead, he describes the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, in very ordinary words.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a man who plants a mustard seed and then it grows. It's the smallest of all seeds and yet it grows into a great bush and tree. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, is like yeast. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl. It's like a lost coin. It's like a man who finds a coin buried in a field. It's like a man who casts his net into the sea.

Jesus chooses these short, little similes, they are common things, everyday things, to describe the glory and magnificence of God. They are also things that can be understood, not only several thousand years ago but even today. They are things that aren't complicated. And while the similes are common, they are also very diverse.

Yeast has nothing to do with a buried treasure. A fine pearl really doesn't have a lot in common with a mustard seed. A lost coin and a man scattering seed in the field, nothing really common there.

But if you really look and study this parable, there is one thing that is common. All of these images have a hidden-ness. They are all hidden in some way. The mustard seed is hidden in the earth, and if it's not it's not going to grow. The yeast is hidden in the dough, and, likewise, left alone it won't grow. The treasure is hidden in the field. The costly pearl hidden among a whole string of ordinary pearls. The net is hidden in the depth of the sea. So it would almost be like Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God is hidden from us, and we have to go and find it.

I thought about this. And I think if I were to search for the kingdom of God, I would probably go to or at least start in some really holy place. Maybe I would go to these vaults that contain these old manuscripts that were written thousands of years ago. Perhaps a trip to the Holy Land, or go to the Vatican. Or maybe in one of the wonderful Bible museums in Germany. Because if the kingdom of God really is hidden, as Jesus suggests, it has to be hidden, well, really very well.

But there is also another way of looking at this parable, and that is if we take the words of Jesus literally, and God's kingdom really is hidden in a loaf of bread, or a piece of dirt, if God's kingdom is really hidden in the ordinary of everyday life, the seeds of heaven are sown in the normal, Jesus says. They are wonderful, and yet they are all mixed up in the business of our day. And if Jesus can see God's glory in something so simple as a tiny seed, then maybe we should be more aware of all the miracles that surround us.

I'll admit this morning that this sermon is pretty light on theology. You know what? I studied theology for a lot of years, and I have degrees and advanced degrees. But I have never found a theological answer for "What is the kingdom of God like?" And so let's go with what Jesus says.

Jesus shows us this morning that the kingdom of God is in the ordinary, in things that we can see and experience all around us, in my time and my space.

I'm sure most of you heard of this senseless car accident this past week, where a drunk driver was speeding down Charles Street, neglected to stop at the stop sign where it intersects with Dale, and goes flying through at seventy miles an hour, crashes into a bus, with an impact so great the car actually went through the bus, killing a young man. Incredible sadness, brokenness, began to pour out from the community. The crash site is fairly near our place, and we drive by it often.

Friday night, my wife Cindy and I were driving by this site, it wasn't dark yet, and it was filled with people. There was food; there were picnics that people were sharing. There was music playing. There were flowers. There was an air of almost a community get-together or a street fair. And here was a community coming together to pray, to hold each other, to share each other's pain, to sing together. And I thought, as we drove by, "There is the kingdom of God." Amidst all of this tremendous sadness, it was like a light. The kingdom of God just breaking through the clouds.

Speaking of clouds, it seems like East Africa, where we lived for many years, is in perpetual drought. And I remember a year when it was especially bad. Rains had failed again. The heat became unbearable. It was so bad that livestock, not only livestock but the wild animals, zebras, giraffe, and wildebeest, started dying along the road. And we would drive down this road at the time and we would have to take cloths and tie them around our face to keep from gagging from the stinking, rotten carcasses. Fields lie bare, crops failed, hungry children filled the streets, people died. But then one hot and steamy afternoon it began to cloud up. It began to thunder and lightning. The skies opened up and the rains came. And immediately when they started, people poured out into the streets of Dar es Salaam, a city of over three million people, and in loud voices they started singing. They fell down and started praying. Joy had come back from its absence. That, people, is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the storm that brought rain. And yet rain is so ordinary. The kingdom of God is the joy of people.

That was then, and this is now. Where is the kingdom of God for you and me? What's here right this moment, as we gather together today and every Sunday? Speaking of hiddenness, I don't think a lot of us could see the beautiful music that was being played. But inside of those flutes, inside of the piano, the organ, is the kingdom of God, and it breaks out for us to hear, for us to ponder and meditate. The kingdom of God is worshiping on Sunday morning. The kingdom of God follows us out of the sanctuary on Sundays into the social hall. The kingdom of God is in the coffee that we share, in the food that we eat, in the wonderful fellowship that we have. The kingdom of God is here, people, it's here always.

But the kingdom of God is also out there. The kingdom of God is taking the time to stop and smile at a stranger, or telling a Muslim woman how beautiful is her headscarf. I've done that at times, and it is so rewarding. The smile, the acknowledgement, is just wonderful. God's kingdom breaking through. Jesus tells us that. The kingdom of heaven is not to be found in some far-off exotic place. The hymn that we just sang says that in the last verse. It says,

*"not in some heaven, light years away, [but] here in this place the new light is shining."*

The kingdom of God is here in all the ordinary people and places of every day.

So, you see, Jesus understood that the kingdom of God is beyond words. And so he tells us to look at field and seed, look at rain and sun, birds in air, yeast and bread, flutes and coffee. The kingdom of heaven is like these things, says Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is found in such.

There is something amazing about the kingdom of God. As Cindy and I saw on Friday evening, the kingdom of God can break through even in the ugliness of life.

I remember one time when we were working in Masai land, their choir was singing. No instruments, nothing, just people getting up and singing. And when the choir got up to sing, once of many, many times that they sang during the service, there was a young girl right in the front who could hardly stand up, she was so frail. We looked at her. She had AIDS, and she was dying. You can see AIDS in faces of people. But as they began to sing, she stood there, she smiled, and her very being radiated joy. And the kingdom of God in that girl was just breaking through. Set in the urgent poverty and a sure death, there was the kingdom of God.

We also look at the cross. You know, we have pretty pictures of crosses and nice jewelry, but we all know that's not what the real cross was. It was a cruel, long instrument of death. But right there on the cross, the kingdom of heaven burst through, and burst through with that promise that God is with us always. And through the death of his son, we are given new life.

We find the kingdom of God here and now. In our ordinary daily lives, through the good times and the bad times, too, we celebrate the kingdom of Almighty God.

When you go home today, say to yourself, or say to a spouse, or friend, or child, or even a stranger, say, "The kingdom of God is like . . . ." And then you fill in the blank.

Amen.