

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 26, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“WHAT IS THE KINGDOM LIKE?”

Scriptures:

Genesis 29:15–28

Psalm 105:1–11, 45b

Romans 8:26–39

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

+++++

One of the old descriptions of a sermon was “*Three points and a poem*”.

This was the reality for some time in mainline churches.

I have an old book on preaching that has a whole chapter of poems suitable for use in sermons.

In seminary, I was taught a method of sermon preparation that involved careful analysis of the text, followed by that was called “*concretization*” – finding a way to make the text real for the congregation.

I have used a number of different methods over the years, but I have settled on the use of stories as a vital preaching tool.

My retirement business card says “*Free Range Preacher/Pastor/Storyteller*”

I am in good company, I think – Jesus was a storyteller.

He was a Jew, he came from a religion of oral tradition – history, culture and wisdom were taught by stories.

Today’s Gospel passage is all-story, all the time.

That’s what parables are – stories. But stories with a clear purpose.

Today’s Gospel is less than 10 verses – but has 5 parables.

They are called Parables of Kingdom.

Jesus is teaching about God’s Kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven.

I have been taught that Jesus talked about the Kingdom of Heaven more than any other subject.

The kingdom is . . . a mustard seed . . . a bit of yeast in dough . . . a hidden treasure . . . a pearl of great value . . . a net catching fish.

Jesus here slides easily from the agricultural to the culinary to the marketplace and to the fishing trade.

It all seems jumbled together at first glance.

But even though Jesus is throwing out these various images at a fast and furious pace, he’s also teaching one of the most remarkable truths that emerges from the gospel:

namely, the unexpected **hiddenness** of the kingdom of God.

Jesus always made clear that the kingdom of God was going to save and rescue this world precisely by virtue of its being so very different from the powerful, flashy, showy political kingdoms that otherwise capture our attention.

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, looks small, even tiny. It looks foolish.

In fact, the kingdom can even disappear completely the way a seed gets *buried* in the soil.

It takes 750 mustard seeds to equal one gram.

Drop one of those little wisps into the dirt and you won't even be able to see it or even recover it if you try.

The same is true of yeast in dough: once it's mixed into the water, flour, and oil, the yeast disappears—you could not separate it back out again (much less locate it) if you tried.

Yet these tiny things have great effects. Try and find yeast in a store in these days.

So also, with the kingdom: it's not what you expect in terms of political clout.

The kingdom of God is not about gleaming capital cities studded with marble colonnades and soaring executive mansions.

It's not about some fierce army plowing under the opposition by sheer dint of its power.

Compared to all of that, God's kingdom looks as insignificant as a grain of mustard or a packet of dry yeast.

But the kingdom can change hearts. It can change the world.

It *has* changed the world.

The kingdom is here but it's modest. It's hidden. It's quiet.

In fact, those who discover the kingdom sometimes tend to stumble upon it almost by accident.

The kingdom is a great treasure, but you're not going to find this valuable commodity posted on the big board on Bay Street.

No, you're going to stumble on it in some remote field.

The person who owns the field won't even know it's there, but once you find it, your joy will be so massive that you'll do whatever it takes to buy that field.

All of this is profoundly surprising.

We are so accustomed to these images in Jesus' parables that they typically don't strike us as absurd or paradoxical.

But they are.

Think of it:

the kingdom is a seed scarcely visible to the naked eye and that disappears completely in dirt.

The kingdom is yeast which a *woman* kneads into dough.

In Jesus' day so-called "*woman's work*" was disdained such that Jesus was being quite provocative by making a woman a leading character, working the kingdom into this world.

And has it ever struck you that the man who finds the treasure in the field is a little devious?

Jesus says that this man finds some treasure in a field that does not belong to him.

He then covers up this treasure again, so the owner won't know it's there and then, without saying a word, he buys this field from the unsuspecting owner.
It's a little sneaky!

Suppose you were at a garage sale looking over some old purses.

But then suppose you discovered that inside one of those old purses was a wad of \$100 bills.

Wouldn't you feel a little shady if you silently purchased it for \$3 without telling the owner that she had missed a wee little something when cleaning out the purse before the garage sale?!

Tiny seeds, invisible yeast, woman's work, a slightly underhanded purchase:

Had it been left up to us, this is not how we would have described the single most powerful, meaningful, and joyful reality in the universe!

But it is how Jesus described it.

This is the kingdom Jesus bequeathed to us.

It is the kingdom he asked us to pray for and the kingdom in which we asked us to live out the will of God on earth every day.

SCOTT HOEZEE, CALVIN SEMINARY:

But this also means that if we take our cues from Matthew 13, then it is clear that both our kingdom living and our kingdom proclamation will be more about quiet acts of loving faithfulness than about headline-grabbing, bullhorn tactics.

We cannot present the gospel of a suffering servant like Jesus by being arrogant finger-waggers.

We cannot give the world the good news of grace if we mostly position ourselves as stern bearers of bad news and judgment.

The kingdom of God represents the most powerful force the world has ever known.

But we've got to let the kingdom grow and leaven in its own quiet, humble ways if people's hearts are really going to be changed.

In fact, as commentator Dale Bruner points out, it is curious to notice that in the parables of the treasure and pearl, it is only after the people run across these valuables that they become changed people who sell all they have.

That may be one of the Bible's many hints, Bruner claims, that we cannot force people into the kingdom by *first* requiring them to follow a prescribed list of good deeds.

Once you find the gospel, you have all the joy you need to motivate you to live a changed life.

Until then, however, you won't find much motivation to follow the will of God on earth nor will the church's acting as the world's morality police bully people into the kingdom.

So as bearers of God's kingdom, we keep plugging away at activities which may look silly or meaningless to the world but that we believe contain the very seed of a new creation.

We keep coming to church and singing our old hymns, reciting our old formulas and creeds.

All of us who preach keep cracking open an ancient book called the Bible, looking to find within it truths that are anything-but ancient.

We keep gathering at sick beds and death beds and whisper our prayers for the Spirit of the resurrection to be with us in life and in death.

We keep drizzling water onto squirming infants and popping cubes of white bread into our mouths in the earnest faith that through the Spirit baptism and communion don't just mean something, they mean *everything*.

And

we keep working for Jesus in this mixed-up, backward world of ours.

We quietly carry out our jobs and raise our kids and tend our marriages in the belief that God has designs for all those things and it's our job to follow them.

We keep pointing people to an old rugged cross, having the boldness to suggest that the man who died on that cross is now the Lord of the galaxies.

But we cannot close out our look at Matthew 13 without noticing that after piling up one fiercely quiet and subtle image after the next, Jesus concludes with an image where subtlety goes out the window.

There will come a time of reckoning at the end of all things, Jesus says.

There will come a time when the "*bad fish*" will get tossed into a fate that is more than definitely on the grim side.

So in the long run, despite all Jesus had to say about the hiddenness of the kingdom in the here and now, the day will come when the kingdom will be all in all and each person will either be in that kingdom or outside of it.

We witness to the kingdom in ways consistent with the kingdom, which means lovingly and humbly and compassionately.

But witness we must. The stakes are too high to stay quiet.

"Have you understood all these things" Jesus asked.

Hilariously the disciples reply with a simple "Yes," which you just know was not completely true!

And to compound whatever fogginess they may have had anyway, Jesus then says that if you do understand all this, you'll be like a homeowner who brings out "new treasures as well as old."

What that means is still a bit of a mystery even 2,000 years later!

"Have you understood all these things?" Sure. Yup. Got it.

Well, probably not.

But even yet today we need to understand these things well enough to feel the glory of the kingdom's hidden nature

and

the absolute urgency of our pointing people to that kingdom every chance we get.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND HOLY SPIRIT...AMEN

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

"The promise of the parables about the kingdom of heaven is that even when the kingdom is not seen, it is near."

"God's Way is quiet, small, slow, and humble, yet persistent and unrelenting."

STEWARDSHIP THOUGHT

That's what I consider true generosity: You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1946), writer, intellectual, activist

Contemporary Call to Worship

What mysteries there are in God's world!

We, so sophisticated, stand in awe at the wonders of the natural world.

We look at the tiniest of seeds and wonder what will happen

From that small seed will grow a large shrub.

Although we consider our gifts to be small and insignificant,

God will use our gifts in miraculous ways.

Praise the God of small seeds and mighty power. Amen.

PRAYER OF APPROACH

God of the past, present and future, we marvel at the wonder of your creation.

We praise you for the blessings of this season, for gardens growing, birds singing, shouts of joy in times of play and restful evening sunsets.

Such good gifts all around us remind us of your faithfulness to us.

You promise us a life beyond anything we can hope or imagine, a kingdom marked by grace, love, and justice for all.

In Jesus' name, by the power of the Spirit breathing within us, We praise you for your loving kindness and the hope it brings to us day by day.

As we consider your faithfulness to us, we cannot but help think about the ways we have not lived faithfully. Merciful God:

We confess that we feel more comfortable with the way things are, rather than live out the challenges we meet in Jesus.

Tempted by the promises of our culture, we rely on the status quo to protect and prosper some but not all.

Turning away from the cries of the hurting, we fail to stand up for the justice they seek.

Afraid to speak of our faith and hope in you, we remain silent and complacent.

Forgive us all the ways we let you down.

We offer our praise and prayers in the name of Jesus...AMEN

ASSURANCE

If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us,
embracing our condition
and exposing Himself to the worst by sending his own Son,
is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?

So be at peace!
Because of God's extravagant love, you are forgiven.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Good and generous God,

In Jesus Christ you came to us, promising us life in abundance.

We give you thanks today for the abundant gifts we receive in him:

Assurance of your love day by day;

Relief of mercy when we recognize our own failings;

Hope renewed when things seem bleak;

Peace that comes when we trust ourselves to your eternal keeping.

These are the gifts that matter, O God, so for all the times we experience these gifts we thank you

Generous God, the world is going through difficult times this summer.

So we pray for all whose lives seem empty of joy:

Because plans have changed, and friends seem far away.

Because hearts are filled with disappointment and loneliness.

Because sorrow and grief rise up each day.

Support each one we name in this silence with your abundant compassion:

(Keep silence for at least 10 seconds)

Generous God, so many things must be rearranged because of the pandemic and what it has revealed.

We pray for those whose lives are empty of purpose,

and for those who do not know the respect of their neighbours:

Because they are without work.

Because they face discrimination and are devalued in our communities.

Because they have made poor choices and cannot find a way forward.

Support each one we name in this silence with your abundant mercy and show them signs of hope:

Generous God,

We remember before you those whose lives are empty of peace and hope:

Because they struggle with illness or disability.

Because they are powerless in the face of violence.

Because old animosities rankle and opportunities for reconciliation are elusive.

Send your dove of peace and promise to create new possibilities for each one.

Good and generous God, fill us with the energy and compassion of your Spirit to reach out to those facing difficult times. May we become the gift we have received in Jesus for it is in his name we pray, saying...

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction

Step out into the world in humble confidence:
there is nothing about to happen that God has not foreseen,
and no situation where Christ will not be there ahead of you,
preparing a place and an opportunity for you.

The peace of God, which goes beyond all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

And the blessing of God all-loving,
the Creator, Redeemer, and Counsellor,
will be with you now and always. **Amen!**