

A sermon preached at St. Timothy's, Herndon, VA on Sunday, July 30, 2023.  
9th Sunday after Pentecost, Year 12A: Genesis 29:15-28; Ps. 105:1-11, 45b; Rom. 8:26-39; Matt. 13:31-33,44-52

**I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Have you ever tried to describe a difficult or abstract concept to someone, especially when you know the person you are speaking with doesn't know anything about what you are talking about? If you have, you know what Jesus is trying to do in these five parables from Matthew's Gospel today. Jesus is trying to describe the abstract concept of God's Kingdom in terms that his hearers could understand.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples proclaim good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near!" Here, Jesus offers several brief parables that explore the implications of this announcement for people's lives. The Kingdom is not easy to understand or explain, so Jesus has to use several different analogies to get his point across to different audiences: a tree that becomes a sheltering home; yeast that penetrates and expands; treasure that is hidden in a field; a prized pearl; and a net that gains a great catch. Some people might get one, others perhaps will grasp a different one, and still others might get the gist from one or more of the other three. Yet, all these parables are about transformation -- TRANSFORMATION -- specifically, how the Kingdom of God can transform believers.

The first parable Jesus uses is the Parable of the Mustard Seed. For the ancients, the mustard seed had the reputation as the smallest seed, yet it produced a tree which can grow to be up to fifteen feet in height. The parable shows us that big things can come in small packages. The Kingdom comes to us in small ways such as through the ordinary people we meet on our Christian walk of faith. Whenever we serve the poor, the elderly or the sick, we are serving God and God's Kingdom.

Jesus intended to use this parable to encourage the early disciples as they faced overwhelming odds, and this parable continues to encourage disciples today. Most of the Church's work gets done in ordinary circumstances. Our mission may seem overwhelming, and our resources too few, but Jesus promises that God's power makes everything possible, and anything possible.

The Kingdom also comes in hidden and unexpected ways, as described in the Parable of the Yeast. Today, yeast comes in neat little packages, but Jesus was talking about leaven, which was what we know today as sourdough starter. The woman in the parable hid the leaven in 3 measures of flour (which is a LOT of flour). Doing this would cause the entire batch to become leavened and rise...so that many loaves of bread could be baked. (A LOT of loaves of bread!) The point

of this parable is that God's Kingdom takes hold in hidden and unexpected ways and can have great yields.

The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl show us what our allegiances should be and where they should be. Was the treasure seeker behaving in an unethical manner? Maybe Yes, perhaps No, but that isn't the point. The point is that both the treasure and the pearl can't be kept secret. God's Kingdom also can't be kept secret -- it must not be kept secret. We are to spread the Good News about the Kingdom, just like the mustard seed grows and spreads out. But when we do this, we have to pay a cost. We have to give up something of worldly value in order to gain something of even more value.

There is an even greater cost that we must be prepared to pay. Following Jesus can lead to rejection by society and/or our family, as many Christians in the Third World know all too well. There might be persecution, jail time, beatings or even worse. There's no way to follow Jesus without a cross, but guess what? Some people, just at Jesus' mere asking, drop everything they are doing, desert their parents, let their work fall by the wayside, drop their nets back into the boat, and follow Him. That's what the Kingdom of God does to those who find it, says the Lord.

The Kingdom starts out small and grows into Good News (That's capital G, capital N, folks)! It's a treasure worth giving up everything else to get. And Why is that? Because our old ways rely on a false God who likes to punish people, a false God who justifies the ways in which we punish one another. In Jesus, we meet a God of Forgiveness and Grace and Love. We meet Him in our daily lives as he hosts us in a meal of forgiveness and grace, the meal of peace for this world.

The Parable of the Net means that God's Kingdom is available to everyone. It catches both good and bad, and our call as Christians is to pull that net through the water of our communities and grab whatever we can. This is God's way. Some undesirables will grow into genuine Kingdom people, and some who seemed promising in the beginning will betray God in the end. But we are not responsible for keeping out the riffraff. The evil is tossed back into the fires of hell, and God's Kingdom is accomplished in the end.

Jesus is encouraging us to live the Kingdom in every aspect of our lives because the Kingdom is here and now on earth. It also promises an eternal reward. Between the microscopic beginning when the seed is planted in us and the grand culmination of its growth, there is continuity. God's Kingdom is pervasive and priceless. Within God's Kingdom, we get more than we bargain for. The seed and the yeast represent God's universality in our lives. It is worth selling all that we have to be a part of it. We have to make room for the Kingdom in our lives. We must allow it to take over our lives in a big way. When we allow God to be

significant in our lives, we create a path for God to become significant in the lives of others.

The Kingdom involves four things:

- 1) God's kingship, rule, or dominion;
- 2) The rule of Heaven is spiritual in nature;
- 3) It is visible today in God's Church, and
- 4) It is in both the present and the future.

The message of this portion of Mathew's Gospel is that God's Kingdom has come near. The Kingdom is present when God's authority, actions and presence are felt. It is where and when God's Will is being done and God's Rule is accepted and acted upon.

So, I invite you to take a good look at your life. Do you realize what we have found in God's Reign? Has it deeply affected our lives, given us a sense of priorities, filled us with gratitude for having been "netted" for God? We must be patient, and we must exercise some discernment. God does not see things as we see them. What is important to us is insignificant to God, and what is unimportant to us is more important to God. Things aren't always what they seem to be.

We do not live according to the prevalent standards that surround us. We choose honesty, even when it means not gaining extra benefits or profits on the job. We must treat all people as beloved children of God, even when we don't think those people may deserve it ... the Truth is, none of us deserve it! We are faithful in our relationships, our marriages, and our friendships, even though the world treats these promises so casually. We help people who need us, even if we don't owe them anything. We have hope as we look into the future, even though there is a lot that could make us despair. We forgive those who offend us, even though our world keeps a long memory of wrongs.

We can be like the Pharisees, but to the extent that we are responsible for studying Scripture and teaching it to others. We are to be trained for life in God's Kingdom through worship, Bible Study, and Christian fellowship. We need to engage in spiritual disciplines such as praying, reading the Bible, and maybe reading Morning Prayer regularly.

When we feel alienated, separated, or estranged, maybe by others or even by our own selves, when it feels like everyone and everything is against us, it's easy to forget that God is unmistakably for us. Sometimes, we get dirt in our eyes and the deep realities of divine love are hidden from us. When that happens, we must remember that the subtleties of God's Kingdom require a discerning heart in order to find them.

Finding the Kingdom of God within and between us, spread out before us, requires dying -- dying to that god who hides in heaven or waits in the wings until we have cleaned up our act or gotten everything exactly in order. Dying to such a

faraway entity of righteousness means coming alive to a God of Compassion as well as Goodness. If Jesus is right (and we know that our Lord is), God is waiting in the weeds of our lives to bind up our wounds and mend the hurts that separate us from ourselves and one another, and from all that is Holy.

I have a modern-day parable that was recently shared with me that Jesus might have told if he lived in our neighborhood right now. Would you like to hear it? (My wife actually gave me this for today's sermon) Maybe, ... just maybe, the kingdom of God is like a city finally getting rid of a football owner who was a long-time embarrassment and having new owners who sound excited and knowledgeable and make everyone want to be a football fan again! HAIL!