

July 26, 2020: Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 (Proper 12)

Matthew 13 is a chapter of parables. There are six in all; last week we heard one, the parable of the wheat and weeds. Today we hear the other five. The parables begin, *the kingdom of heaven is like*. First, a word about parables. They are stories based on common human experience, but often contain some exaggeration or odd behavior that is important to the meaning. This may sound strange, but a parable is like a joke. Parables have ‘punchlines,’ one point that all the details of the story support. A difference between good and bad jokes is bad ones have details that are superfluous or detract from the story. The same with parables: details are important only in supporting the point. Always ask: what is the one point, Jesus is making?

Today there are 2 sets of 2 parables, and what seems like a stand-alone story. The first set of two is the mustard seed and the yeast in the dough. These surely gave comfort to early believers: from the smallest of beginnings, greatness will emerge. For the mustard seed story, the ‘punchline’ is *the birds come to nest* in it. In Ezekiel and Daniel, the restored kingdom of Israel is described as a tree in which the nations will come and roost. Jesus teaches that the coming Kingdom, seemingly small now, will be the place of refuge, new birth, and nurture for all people.

The yeast in the dough, is related to the previous teaching yet the ‘punchline’ is different. Here Jesus says God’s kingdom grows to greatness in small, miraculous, secret ways, not by conquering its foes in grand battle but through converting from within.

The second set are the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value. They testify to the unexpected wonder and exuberant joy found in the kingdom. The stories also point to the different ways in which we experience the kingdom at times. In *the treasure* the presence of God is something we ‘come upon’; we may be unaware, pre-occupied, consumed with self—and suddenly there is God, whom we seemingly stumble over.

The parable of the pearl of great value portrays a different experience: we search and with perseverance we find what we are looking for. In both these parables the kingdom brings about the spontaneous desire to risk all for the sake of the kingdom: whether we trip over it or we search for it. Perhaps the 14th Century theologian, Julian of Norwich, had these parables in mind when she wrote: “O God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough for me. And if I ask anything that is less, ever shall I be in want, for only in you have I all.”

Sometimes we stumble into it, sometimes we search. As in the mustard seed and the yeast, at times, the kingdom seemingly breaks in from outside, at other times we experience the kingdom growing within. All these parables are true. We do not pick one and ignore all others. Imagine the parables, indeed the entire New Testament, to be a diamond. One may look at a diamond and see its beauty; but if you turn the diamond and move it in the light, even more beauty is revealed. This is how the Scriptures work: they are like a diamond, providing different facets of the reality of God. To see only one facet, however beautiful, is to see only part. Jesus taught with many parables, each revealing a different, beautiful facet of God’s love.

The last parable in today’s Gospel appears unrelated. The parable of the fishnet illustrates Jesus’ admonition to not become fixated on evil; do not worry, all things will be sorted out by God in the end. This should sound familiar. It is the same point Jesus makes in last Sunday’s Gospel, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds that begins Chapter 13. In Matthew 13 there are two parables that make the identical point that surround two sets of two parables illustrating related points. The Wheat and Weeds and the parable of the fishnet are kind of bookends, what Bible scholars call an “inclusio:” a section of Scripture hedged in by almost identical passages, with everything in between being related to, differing yet similar facets of what Jesus is teaching. The section begins and ends with Jesus teaching us to wait on God’s judgment because the kingdom of heaven is founded on God’s loving-kind mercy. In the middle we are taught that the kingdom is built on humility; what may appear small to the world is God’s economy of salvation; the kingdom will grow secretly, but miraculously, nonetheless. The kingdom may seem hidden or we may search heartily but we will find it, and when we do it becomes our treasure, for which we will risk everything. Amen.