

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

On the occasion of our leave-taking
July 27, 2014 – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Rev. Marsha Vollkommer

I love to think about the kingdom of heaven...not the Sunday School heaven, with a capital H...up there somewhere...that we (hope) we will find when we die. No, I love to think about the heaven that is right here, right now – all around us and, I believe, inside us. It has only been in the not-too-distant past that I became aware that when we say the kingdom of heaven is at hand...it really is! And this morning the author of the Gospel of Matthew has certainly given us enough ways to think about it...so many ways, the mind reels.

I'm sorry, but I can't help but chuckle at this somewhat awkward end to the parables in Matthew. Can't you just imagine a student in the department of Scriptural Writing, taking an exam at the end of the semester in the Parables course – a written exam, of course. And the professor glances at the hourglass and says to the class those words we all dreaded when taking a test, "5 minutes, folks." And our poor young author has a panic attack. Oh, crud!!! Right here in my head I have at least five more perfect parables. I'll just write them all down, real fast, and hope I get credit for their potential.

But then, parables are all about potential, are they not? The potential to get closer to the message – to that which we don't always understand – by the telling of things we understand very well. At first hearing, today's parables are about things hidden...a mustard seed so tiny it is hard to hold in the palm of your hand, a treasure hidden in a field, a sought-after pearl, fish...somewhere down there under the surface of the water. But a generalization doesn't suffice. It is more complicated – more nuanced – than that.

A mustard seed – for those who were listening to Jesus speak – was not the key to a cash crop. No, mustard seeds were the beginning of weeds, of weeds that grew into bushes, that grew into, well, gigantic bushes, rather than majestic trees. Mustard wasn't a cash crop, it was a trash crop. And yet those weedy branches provided shelter and gathering space and nesting places for flocks of birds. Homes, for God's creatures. Something wonderful from junk!

Leavened bread, made with yeast, was considered unclean to the Jews, so why would Jesus talk about it? Perhaps because when you take something as ordinary - ordinary just as we are ordinary - something as ordinary as yeast, and flour, and a little water and mix them all together, a miraculous thing happens. Even when you take something scorned and ostracized, and add it to the mix, miracles can happen.

The kingdom of heaven...

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, is like a treasure hidden in a field, and when it is found it is worth giving up everything else in order to own it. So, too, is the kingdom like a pearl of great price that is worth sacrificing everything. Ever wonder what you might find in your own life that is worth anything and everything you own? Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is just exactly that...something more valuable, more important, more precious, more worthy than anything else we have.

I have to tell you a rather dear story about the final parable, the story of the great catch of fish. Our granddaughter, Addie, went to kindergarten in Alamogordo, New Mexico, while her dad was stationed at Holloman Air Force Base. Because the public schools were in disarray, her parents followed the advice of friends and put her in a private – “Christian” – school. (And I want you to know that in the text of my sermon I have Christian in quotation marks.) While regaling her parents with all that happened on her first day, Addie told Max and Meg that her teacher issued a warning to the class. If they were naughty, the teacher said, they would go to hell. On the day of my ordination, after worrying considerably that no one had packed her black shoes to wear to the “judgment” – which was apparently what she thought church was all about – Addie encountered the parable we heard this morning. And when the words were read, “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” there came a small voice from right behind me, “Oh, no!”

Parables, shmarables...sometimes they take you right *past* the joyous story of a catch of fish so bountiful that one can afford to throw away the substandard ones and the plentitude of good fish is more than enough. Sometimes they take you to the “Oh, no!” parts, that are so tempting to ignore. No wonder Solomon – who, I will admit, never heard Jesus’ parables, but certainly knew a lot about living in God’s kingdom – no wonder he asked God not for riches, but for understanding. Solomon, who saw people all around him cast into the fiery furnaces of war – just as we do. Solomon, who knew well of weeping and gnashing of teeth, just as we do. No wonder Paul – the Paul who so often seems to have the answer to everything – began talking in circles as he tried to explain with some logic how God knows our needs, and in the end could only conclude “If God is for us, who is against us?”

Life in God’s kingdom – this kingdom of heaven on earth – is not always easy. There is not one of us here who does not know anger and grief and frustration and doubt. There is not one of us here who has never known pain or anguish or regret. Some days we look at the world around us and can see nothing that even resembles the kingdom of heaven. “Who is against us? Well, let me name a few...”

We were not created to live *every* moment of *every* day in ease or luxury or any of those ways we've been told are a sign that we have arrived...especially when too many in this world never will. No, life in the kingdom is messy and complicated, and yet...and yet...

If we open our minds and our hearts – and live in the constant awareness that God will grant us understanding – we can **choose** God's kingdom on earth as our home. We can fight for God's kingdom in large ways and small...with a vengeance or with a gentle word. We **can** choose...our thoughts, our actions, our feelings, our words. And when we forget to make the right choice – when we forget we are bearers of the *love God sang into creation* – when we forget the kingdom is for and about **all** that was created and not just ourselves, we can rest assured that God's understanding surpasses our own...and we will be forgiven...and God will be there to help us put our foot firmly back on the right path.

We have truly arrived, in **God's** kingdom on earth, when we go forth, forgiven, and hold out our hands for the gift of the bread that is shared. For that small piece...broken from the common loaf...broken from that humble little lump of yeast and flour and water, that holds within it the entire kingdom and feeds us enough to go forth.

Today marks a passage for Rob and me. In its own way, it marks a passage for you as well. When we moved to Galena nine years ago, we had no idea how the kingdom of heaven would manifest itself to us in this place. I cannot tell you how many times, when I was asked about my call to ordained ministry, I used the metaphor of yeast. The wondrous people of Grace Church, I would say, are like yeast. If I have a suggestion or a plan or a yearning or one of my scathingly brilliant ideas (which is a bit of a joke), someone – or many someones – help to make something grow. This place – this house of God – this gathering of sisters and brothers in Christ – has been a treasure for us. It is a visible and palpable and grace-filled part of the kingdom.

You have loved us and supported us, encouraged us and lifted us up. When it was necessary – when our passions became hard-headedness - ever so gently you helped us find our way...a true gift of loving kindness. You opened yourselves to let us into your lives – your personal lives and your life here together. You let us share in all those things I mentioned before – your sorrow, your anger, your frustration, your doubt. You showered us with your joy and your laughter. You opened yourselves to vulnerability, which freed us to be vulnerable, too. Our dreams of working in the kingdom found a home here, and we are blessed that you shared them with us.

Life is full of what I like to call “counted cross-stitch wisdom” – you know, the sayings that hang on people's walls, are printed on refrigerator magnets, and find their way to various and sundry greeting cards. One that has been resting in my heart as we have

prepared to move these past few – yes, very few – weeks finds its way to most parents at some time or other. It says, “We give our children two things. One is roots and the other wings.” Roots, and wings. A truly beautiful way to express what you have given Rob and me. We put down deep roots in the warm and loving ground of your friendship. Through your generous spirits we tested our wings and found that we could, indeed, soar. And now, we fly away, *but we are not leaving*. The bonds of love that embraced us here will hold us all.

In God’s kingdom of heaven on earth, we have the all the treasure we need – each and every one of us has been blessed with the love of God to give and to receive...blessed with the grace of God that knits us together in our lives and in our hearts...blessed with the joy of God to make and to hold our memories of one another...blessed with the peace of God that binds us together forever.

The kingdom of God may be like many things, but above all and through all and in all the kingdom of God *is God*...and it abides in each and every one of us.

May the blessings of the kingdom be yours, dear friends...and may you continue to be God's very special blessings in the world!