

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 12A

PREACHED JULY 30, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

Texts: Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52; 1 Kings 3.5-12; Psalm 119.129-136;

Romans 8.26-39

For the **third** week in a row, our gospel lesson is a **parable** - or in today's instance, a **series** of parables - about the kingdom of heaven. After two **detailed** parables about the sower and the seed and weeds - both with lengthy **explanations** - it is as if someone said to Jesus: "Tell us more about the kingdom of heaven. How would you describe it?" Jesus concludes his message to the crowd by saying that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a merchant who searches for and finds fine pearls, and finally a net. Each of these short descriptions expands our understanding of God's kingdom.

- From the **mustard seed** we conclude that from very **modest** things, **great** things will come. God is at work in people, events, situations (even mustard seeds) that we might regard as **insignificant**. But we could also conclude that once the kingdom of heaven takes root, it will do its own thing. This **may** be OK, but if the plant that comes up is an invasive **weed**, then we are stuck with not much of anything.

- From the **yeast hidden** in the flour, we can see that the kingdom of heaven is **transformative** and **uplifting**. Without **God**, life would be **flat** and **dull** (although sometimes that would be quite appealing!). It also would be quite **filling**; that amount of dough and yeast would make enough

bread for over 100 people! So **God's actions often have results which are wildly beyond our expectations.**

- The kingdom of heaven is also like **hidden treasure** that has been found because **it brings joy**. In exchange for the **possibility** of finding more treasure, and thusly joy, the man **risks** it all to **obtain** more. As such, the kingdom of heaven is not simply **joy**; it is a joy that is **worth everything we have**.

- The next parable teaches about a merchant who is searching for a **pearl**. Like the man who finds a hidden treasure, this merchant sells all that he has to purchase it. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is a **treasure**; it is **valuable** and something to **be valued**. Jesus also seems to underscore that the kingdom of heaven must be **sought**; it is not **easily obtained** or **readily available**.

- In the final parable, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a **net**. As in the parable of the weeds, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as **diverse** and **inclusive**. The angels again come to *“separate the evil from the righteous.”* However, here the net contained **various kinds of fish**. Just as the **fish exist together** in the sea, we **also** must live together, **exist peaceably**, and **leave the judgment to God**.

These five parables would have helped the crowds to have a better understanding of the kingdom of heaven. Yet, there's something **sneaky** about these parables - and I mean that quite **literally**. In each parable

there seems to be some element of **surprise** or **stealth**. Here's what I mean:

1. While most of us grew up reading the parable of the **mustard seed** somewhat simplistically – “big things often have small beginnings” – the truth is that mustard was a **weed** - **uncontrollable, invasive**, and (perhaps most notably) **undesirable**.
2. Today we see yeast as a **good** thing for baking. But in the biblical world, leaven was a sign of **impurity**, because kneading it into the flour irreparably **tainted** (changed) the loaves.
3. Rushing out to buy a field because you know it's worth far more than the seller is aware, while perhaps **shrewd** in a business sense, could also be considered **underhanded**, if not **dishonest**.
4. There is a surprising **joyfulness** in the one who sells all to buy a precious pearl, yet I suspect that few around the buyer would likely have **understood** his actions.

So **here's my take** on these parables. First, the kingdom of God is **threatening** before it is **comforting**, because it invites no half measures. The Gospel makes a claim on our **whole lives**, not just a **portion** of them. God invades our whole world, our entire reality, our very being. And **God demands our whole lives** - total commitment - not just the portion that shows up on Sunday mornings.

So, this **might** mean that Jesus' words about the kingdom of God are good news only to those who are not **satisfied** with their station in life. For those who **are content**, selling everything to possess a single pearl - no matter how **valuable** - seems a little **crazy**. How can **anything** be so **precious** as to give up **everything else** to possess it?

But to those who are **dissatisfied** - with the status quo, with what they have been able to secure on their own, with the values, stereotypes, or prejudices of the culture - then Jesus' Gospel, while still **disruptive** and even **upsetting**, nevertheless **feels true, and real**, and something **worth having** at any cost. This is, perhaps, why the church has always grown most **quickly** in those places where life is most **fragile**, if not threatened - places like the continents of Africa and South America. When you have **nothing else** to turn to for comfort, for support, one turns to God.

These parables say a **second** thing as well. **Faith is about seeing** - seeing something that **others** do not, seeing something that the **world** does not **acknowledge** and perhaps does not **want** you to see - and **because** of that sight, **persevering**, acting **differently**, investing in a future at which others **scoff**. Faith, it turns out, is not about **knowledge** but about **trust**, the kind of trust that leads you to act and speak **differently**, as if you've been **invited into a secret that not everyone knows**.

Finally, these parables give us an opportunity to see the kingdom life in more concrete terms. **Small acts** of love and kindness "planted" like a

tiny mustard seed can result in **remarkable outcomes**. Seemingly **insignificant acts of mercy** mixed into the community like yeast into flour can **change** the whole community, causing it to "rise" like dough. As some wise person once said, drop the stone in the water and the **ripples** it creates will be endless.

If we are paying **attention**, it's **easy** to see the signs of God's "**kingdom come**" all around us every day. But we also experience God's reign as **coming** - that is, **not yet here**. In **those** times, we are called to **live faithfully** as we **wait** for God's reign to come, for God's **love** and **grace** to be **fully evident** and **fully realized**. Yet, we **can** wait because we know that **God is true to God's word**, and because we know that God's kingdom is **worth waiting for**. Thanks be to God!