

“Parable: Wrestling for a Blessing”

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-46 and Romans 8:26-39

(The scripture readings are within the sermon)

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September 4, 2011 ~ North Presbyterian Church

Donald Armentrout writes “The Kingdom of Heaven is the central content of the mission and message of Jesus. His parables were descriptions of it and his miracles were signs of its presence. The Kingdom of Heaven was made present in Jesus the Christ. With Jesus the Kingdom was made a present reality, something in the here and now. This Kingdom in which righteousness will prevail, is pushing in upon us right now. Even now God is pulling the whole world toward the Kingdom, where justice is the norm of all relationships. This Kingdom, which is characterized by peace, where swords are being beaten into plowshares, is the goal of all of human history.”

Homiletics magazine believes the Kingdom of Heaven “is all about the joy that comes from discovering something priceless while perusing the ordinary. Jesus tells us that the very reign and rule of God, the loving and life-changing activity of God in heaven, has broken into our world and is available now...the Kingdom of Heaven is found in unassuming places and encountered in unlikely ways. And whatever it costs you to “get” it is well worth it.” Yet the Kingdom of Heaven is freely given.

Dennis Hamm explains that the word’s Kingdom of Heaven distract us to think about heaven as a place or getting to heaven. Instead the focus should be on relationships not a place or time. The Kingdom is God rescuing us. It is the fresh initiative of God inaugurated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and still to be fulfilled completely in the future.

Theologians explain the Kingdom of Heaven as the fulfillment of God’s purpose for all creation. Community is an inherent goal of creation. If the joining of humankind and creation with God is a goal of creation and an expression of God’s love and grace then creation is intimately related to salvation. Indeed, creation was a salvific act. Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the communal relations between Divinity and humanity, restores the brokenness that resulted from sin and proclaims that the Reign of God is now in our midst. Thus Christ is both an eschatological prolepsis—the future has broken into our present—and proclaimer of good news—God’s purpose will be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit continues to transform us, pulling us towards the future even as the Spirit stands alongside us during our present. The creative, salvific and transformative act of reuniting creation with God can be described as a perichoretic dance.”

Is that crystal clear? Perhaps that is why Jesus taught in parables. In seminary I had a year long course studying the Kingdom of Heaven. The professor ended the course explaining that the Kingdom is glorious beyond our imagination and certainly beyond our ability to explain to one another. He warned us to be careful in trying to explain the Kingdom for whenever we do we only communicate a small snippet of one facet of the Kingdom.

Jesus revealed the Kingdom of Heaven through parables. Parables have numerous layers of meaning and endless ways of interpretation. Jesus parables give us hints of the Kingdom which is beyond our comprehension. Together we are going to explore four short parables. Listen for what God is saying to you today. God’s word is living so each person and even the same person reading scripture at a different moment will perceive a unique message from God. God’s word is to be meditation upon day and night, to be savored. God’s word should be wrestled with like Jacob wrestled with God. Don’t stop wrestling with God’s word until God has revealed a blessing, a message, feeling, thought, attitude, experience that you can take with you.

Patrick McCormick wrote, “If parables have a job...it’s to force us to make room for a God who is not of our making, to tear down every pious preconception we have and to leave us disturbed and vulnerable in the face of the living God.”

All of this is a long introduction because I am concerned that by sharing interpretations of these parables I may lead you astray from the message God's wants you to hear. I know all these interpretations are incomplete.

Jesus said, Matthew 13:31-32 **"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches."**

The mustard seed yields a phenomenal result from a seemingly insignificant beginning. Mustard never grows into a tree, not even into a shrub. The Kingdom redeems and transforms creation and us into a higher, grandeur being. You may feel small and insignificant however God will grow you into a glorious person greater than your grandest dream. Birds were often used to symbolize the foreigner, the outcast, the outsider. They make a nest, that is find a home, in the Kingdom. Mustard has healing properties. A tree of mustard symbolizes an endless source of healing for every ailment, pain, tear and brokenness. In addition a tree provides shade and shelter a place to rest and be renewed.

Lee Ramsey preached, "The mustard seed whispers about hidden exuberance, about the stunning growth that comes from small insignificant things. But we keep looking towards...life itself, for something bold and grand."

The Message translates this parable as Matthew 13:31-32 **"God's kingdom is like a pine nut that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree, and eagles build nests in it."**

Jesus said, Matthew 13:33 **"The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough."**

One view is God is the woman who works in our lives, permeating all our being enabling us to rise into a wholesome person. Three measures of flour will yield an abundance of bread perhaps revealing that in time God will feed all people, satisfy every hunger and bless us with abundance. What is the connection between the bread of the parable and the bread you will soon partake during communion?

The Kingdom is like yeast. Yeast is so small, it is hardly perceptible. When Jesus first told this parable how yeast made bread rise was a mystery. A pinch of yeast germinates a dynamic new reality, with results far out of proportion to its present size. This parable hints at the inevitable spread and growth of the Kingdom of Heaven until everyone and all of creation is transformed.

Some view the yeast as God's grace that forgives us and enables us to forgive others. Some see the yeast as the Holy Spirit that supplies all of our needs and enables us to be bread for the world. Others see baptism symbolized in the yeast. Baptism and yeast change us, not in the substance, the dough is the same, but in the quality; it rises us to new life, it enables us to savor hope, peace, love and joy. Still others see the yeast revealing how God works in us, not by force on the outside, rather by grace on the inside, growing, partnering, until all of our being celebrates a risen and wholesome relationship with God.

Lee Ramsey preached, "the yeast and the flour gently point towards all of creation (the whole batch of dough) as the place where God's goodness rises. But we want to divide creation into the good and the bad, the redeemed and the wretched. There is little gladness there."

Matthew 13:33 **"God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread—and waits while the dough rises."**

Jesus said, Matthew 13:44 **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."**

This parable reveals the infinite value of God's Kingdom. We should gladly exchange everything, wealth, power, reputation in order to enter into a relationship with God.

Megan McKenna writes, "The Kingdom is all of our relationships with God seen and known by others outside the community as well as by those within the believing group. So your relationship with God is the treasure. What of the field? The field is where the relationship is expressed, among people. The field is where we return the treasure we found. We hide it again, sell all that we have and go back and buy the field, move in with the folk. What does this mean? Change, each of us, all of us must change,

individuals, religious communities, parishes, national churches. Even holiness has to be done together. This is a dream, the dream of God. The treasure is hidden in the field. The incarnation is hidden in people and in their needs and sorrows and hopes. Together the treasure is shared in the field. We can't just take the treasure for ourselves without community, without the world and the fact that we are responsible for each other. We enter the Kingdom of Heaven in its fullness because of what we have done for one another. ... We are supposed to become the treasure hidden in the field, a new reality in the world, along with Jesus, and anyone who stumbles upon us will rejoice exceedingly and go therefore and sell everything they have to come back to the field, to us and share the treasure."

In other words, the Holy Spirit is within you, others can see Jesus in you, others can experience the Kingdom through you. You are called to conversion to let go of sin and let come the priceless treasure of Jesus. You are blessed to be a blessing. God is enabling you to share the treasure of the Kingdom.

Jesus said Matthew 13:44-46 **"God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidentally found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic—what a find!—and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!"**

This parable reveals that we are to seek the Kingdom with single-mindedness. God's Kingdom should reshape our priorities and be prized above all else. Upon connecting with God our search is over for we discover our honored place in God's family.

Lee Ramsey preached, These parables "lure us towards unbridled abandonment to the grace of God. But we find ourselves calculating our investments of time, of money, of emotional commitment. Joy remains buried under the rubble. Strangely perceptively, by showing us the bounty of God, these kingdom parables simultaneously expose the shabbiness of our own lives when we abandon the buried treasure and forget the mustard seed. Quite simply the parables offer joy. Rather, God offers joy, which the parables keep pointing toward, Kingdom comes whether we receive it or not. Grace abounds whether we are too busy fiddling with our cell phones to know we have stumbled upon it. Mercy is all around us like fresh bread."

Synthesis Commentary writes, "Jesus seems to be saying that before experiencing the hidden power of the Kingdom, we are like fish swimming in the ocean, unaware that we are in water. We are breathing beings, unconscious of the oxygen that surrounds us. We are creatures of God, in the image of God, but unaware that the domain of God encompasses the totality of our being. It's right under our noses, closer than water is to fish or the oxygen that fuels the lungs of the one who breathes. In the Gospel, Jesus begins his teaching ministry by making just this point: Mark 1:15 **"the kingdom is at hand"**. Within your grasp. It is here and now, but not as some colossal event to be observed on history's center stage, locatable as being "here" or "there." The Kingdom is something in our midst.

William Dois preached an entire sermon entitled "Looking for the Kingdom of God To High Up and To Far Away."

A parable is told of an old hermit who was once invited to visit the court of the most powerful king of those times. "I envy such a saintly man, who is content with so little," said the king sadly. "I envy Your Majesty, who is content with even less than I," responded the hermit. "How can you say such a thing, when this entire country belongs to me?" said the offended king. "For precisely that reason," the hermit answered. "I have the music of the celestial spheres, I have the rivers and mountains of the whole world, I have the moon and the sun, because I have God in my soul. ... Your Majesty, on the other hand, has only this kingdom." Amen.