

The Gospel

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"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.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. 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.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

SERMON TITLE: The Impossible Kingdom

In this passage I have just read for you, you have just heard five parables. I find I want to stop and think about each one, so, to have 5 in a row without a moment to reflect feels like overload!

Well, don't worry, fellow scribes, we shall take this time to get a sense of what this information dump is all about!

The setting for this time of teaching is during Jesus' SECOND CIRCUIT around Galilee. In his first circuit, he performed miracles and gathered disciples as people began to follow him. Before his second circuit, he calls His disciples and from them chooses the twelve apostles; there are several miracles performed and the sermon on the Mount is preached, and the "sinful" woman anoints his feet. Then he delivers teaching to the crowds and to his disciples in the form of parables. He

explains his teaching to the disciples because he wants them to begin to grasp what the Kingdom of heaven is all about.

In a previous sermon, I touched on the kind of kingdom the Judeans were expecting, and our reading about Solomon is case in point. They wanted to return to the glory days of David and Solomon-

Make Israel Great Again. When the world came to see the great things the God of Israel had done and learn at the feet of Solomon, the wisest man of all.

Under David, it took a lot of years of fighting other nations, as well as internal battles, to establish the kingdom. And then, Solomon killed off potential rivals to secure his throne.

We know that the disciples were ready to use swords and fight. And approximately 33 years after Jesus' death, Judean radicals revolted against Rome, seeking to be free.

Into this volatile atmosphere and tension, Jesus arrives. The Judean powers that be don't see him as the Messiah, the Chosen One in the line of David. The Roman powers would have dismissed Jesus as an anomaly, except- when the Judean leaders claimed he was a problem, a threat to Roman law and order (the Pax Romana) then they had to respond. It meant nothing to crucify one more Judean to restore the peace, appease the insistent chief priests, elders and scribes.

At this point in his ministry, Jesus wants to paint a picture of what the Kingdom of heaven is like- something very different from kingdoms built on political and military power that they knew and understood.

The first two parables present an objective view, so to speak; standing apart from it and observing the phenomenon of the beginning and growth of the Kingdom of heaven.

In bible college, we were taught that, when interpreting a parable, "don't try to make it walk on all fours." That is, don't try to assign a meaning to every part, or every item in the parable. Seek to find the one truth that the parable is teaching, and then, leave it alone!

Jesus is clear that the parable of the mustard seed is about something big growing from something very small. We don't have to worry about what the birds might represent- they don't represent anything! They are in the parable only to illustrate that the plant that grows from the tiny seed is big enough to serve or support other forms of life.

The point is that the kingdom starts from something so tiny, and yet, it grows exponentially in comparison to where it started. Just as it is a wonder that everything required to grow this large

plant is in this tiny seed, so it will be with the kingdom. The mustard seed could easily be eaten by birds; but when planted, it's a tree they nest in. So shall the kingdom begin impossible small and weak- a single man whom the authorities bury- (okay, now I might be breaking the bible college rule here!!)- and yet it grows and grows to impact the world.

Not by raising an army- not by building a political power base- by smallness, weakness, death, belief.

The next parable, the parable of the yeast, or leaven, continues this objective view, and there is the similarity of the impact of something very small. But this time, instead of the small thing growing into something large, it's about the small thing having a very big impact. So big, that it changes the thing it is hidden inside. The dough bears very little resemblance to it's original state. The yeast has changed- forever. It can't go back to being dough. You can't root out, or pick out the yeast and have just dough again. So shall the presence and impact of the kingdom be. Not at power-play, not a coup; the inevitable influence of God's work, changing the world from within.

With the next two parables, the view changes. Now it's personal. Someone finds a treasure in a field. And in her joy of making this incredible find, she sells all she had and buys that field. (Now, I know the verses always say "he," because it reflects the patriarchal thinking of the times- both the times of the original language and the times that scriptures were translated into English. We have the liberty to be inclusive of humanity, as Jesus did in his ministry).

In first century Palestine, there were no banks in which to safekeep your wealth, so people had to hide it away in little hoards, or bury it in a hole in the ground. Jesus' words would have presented a familiar picture to the disciples. The person in the parable buys the field, because they found a good hiding place for treasure they had found, and they want it to remain hidden and get control of the land itself.

The next parable, the pearl, is similar. Another way of keeping your wealth safe was to keep it on you as something portable, like jewels. This merchant finds a priceless pearl and sells all to have the one. And so, her wealth can be always on her person.

The difference between the two parables is how the priceless is acquired; the treasure is found, whereas the pearl is sought and bought. Not everyone discovers the value of God's kingdom the same way.

The point of both parables is the same. The kingdom contains that which is truly priceless. In the kingdom we find what our hearts truly long for- a divine working and meaning that brings all things into harmony.

The final parable in this passage changes the view again; now it is about the culmination of the kingdom. From an objective view of starting and growing, to the personal view of people's responses, to where everything is heading.

In an earlier parable that Paula spoke on, the wheat and the weeds, the picture is similar. The wheat is gathered and then the weeds, the latter headed for the furnace of fire. The picture of fishing and separating the good/edible/sellable fish from the bad/inedible/worthless fish would, of course, be a very familiar one to the fishermen disciples. But there is a break from this picture, as Jesus talks about angels separating the righteous from the evil, and throwing "the same"- the evil- into the furnace of fire. Weeds are something that gets burned but useless fish are not. Hence, the break from the metaphor to add this teaching.

The meaning seems very clear. As with the wheat and the weeds, there will be good and evil in the world until divine intervention brings about separation. There is a desirable outcome for those who bring value, in one sense or another, to the world, and an undesirable outcome for those who do not bring value to the world.

What is not all that clear is the "furnace of fire." Many Christians, past and present, interpret this to mean hell, a place of eternal unquenchable fire and suffering. But the common picture of hell has been shaped much more by Dante's *Inferno* than what we actually learn from the bible.

It is described as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth." If it were a literal place of torment, I would think the phrase would be agony and gnawing on the tongue. "Weeping" denotes deep sorrow or grief over loss. "Gnashing" is the translation of the other word; "of the teeth" is added as an understanding, but it's just one word. The work is also attributed to beasts, which gnash the teeth as they attack their prey; in Proverbs 19:12 also "to bite."

To me, it is a picture of grief and impotent rage; "gnashing" because those who followed an evil way no longer have any power, they cannot have any impact on others or have their way in anything, anymore.

Which to me also fits the bigger picture here. There are the kingdoms of humankind- they are based on power-brokering, alliances to benefit the few, violent coups to take over when a person has gathered an army sufficient for the task, and subtle, non-violent agreements signed in back

rooms to keep the rich and powerful rich and powerful. When none of these possibilities are available, those committed to making life work for them these ways will weep and burn with impotent rage that their power is no more. Their kingdoms did not endure; they were tossed aside and burned with a cleansing fire.

Jesus has presented a picture of the Kingdom of God in these parables. No power brokers, no shedding of blood. All may find, all may enter in. It will grow and bring change everywhere, as it was created to do.

Conclusion:

This teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven was important for the disciples- and for us- to help us understand that God's Kingdom is not a political one, and not one that would overcome opposition using force. Just like the Judeans of old, there are Christians who believe that the laws of countries and the standards of schools and some choices people make should be governed, restricted and judged by "Christian morals", or "what the bible teaches." The obvious problem with this is that there is no one Christian consensus on Christian morals, standards or what exactly the bible teaches on any number of different subjects. The other problem is that it doesn't fit with how Christ treated people, how he treated "secular" authority or what he said was important for life. These parables are important to understand that the Kingdom of heaven is proceeding as God has intended from the start, and it doesn't need- or want- Christ followers to impose supposed "Christian standards" anywhere. Common sense tells us when to speak up- and then it's about protecting others from harm.

The tree is still growing- the yeast is still working- the treasure we have is for sharing- and God's intended outcome isn't in any danger of being fulfilled. Amen.