

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-46 More Parables
July 30, 2023

A couple of weeks ago the focal passage for the message came from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. The text was the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation. I mentioned then that later in the chapter, Jesus quotes from the 78th psalm:

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.” Matthew 13:35.

We spoke of the significance of parables, to hide the obvious, to reveal the hidden.

Once again we come to the 13th chapter of Matthew and are, once again presented with more parables. Featured in the texts read this morning are four very brief parables that are unlike the longer stories found later in Matthew, such as the Parable of the Talents or of the Sheep and the Goats; or the ones found in Luke, The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son.

These parables can be told in one or two sentences. They are the Mustard Seed, the Yeast, the Treasure Hidden in a Field, and the Pearl of Great Price.

They have in common with the Parable of the Sower that they are parables of the astonishing grace of God. They speak matter-of-factly about the extraordinary nature of life.

The example of a seed, which starts out small and insignificant and turns into something grand and glorious, something very different from the seed itself; the example of yeast, which in this case works itself through such a large amount of dough that it would take an oven the size of a kitchen to contain it, speak of the surprising nature of the Heavenly Kingdom.

And the treasure in the field and the pearl, which are self-explanatory in a way, speak of God’s kingdom as of such extraordinary value that once they are discovered, even if only stumbled upon, one would give everything to attain them.

I wonder if that is the way we apprehend our lives. Certainly we recognize life’s grandeur and though we are unable to comprehend the beauty of heaven, we know it is beyond the limits of imagination. But we are also immersed in the concerns of everyday life, and sometimes these concerns threaten our peace, and distract us from present awareness of the preciousness of life and being. Do we allow ourselves to be surprised? Are we aware of how priceless life is?

The power of the insight revealed in these stories is enhanced when we become more aware of the communities from which Jesus came and to which he spoke. There was a great deal of poverty and pain. There were corrupt religious authorities. There was political subjugation, a complex network of powerful people who were more concerned about their own lives than the well-being of those they were called to serve.

There were the presence of people from the conquering nation that took economic resources from the local population, and all sorts of intrigue between the Romans and the Herodians and their own religious leaders; Pharisees and Sadducees and Temple Priests.

Many, if not most, of the people to whom Jesus preached had legitimate things to be unhappy about and to desire to change. Yet Jesus presented them with the remarkable features of the life all around them, and connected it to the realm of the divine.

He called it the Kingdom of Heaven and to its surprising nature and precious value he added one more feature. He proclaimed to them that it was near, at hand. To be sure, he told parables that had other meanings, but these stand out because of their strident affirmation of the goodness of life, and an affirmation of a goodness and beauty that result only from the presence of God, even in the mundane, or the tragic experiences faced everyday. He said it is right in front of us.

It is a temptation for us to disregard the teaching of Jesus in these parables by accepting the Kingdom of Heaven as being *far away*, both in time and in space. The kingdom is something accessed at the end of earthly life or at the final consummation of the age.

And not surprising at all, but something we can control and plan for. I do not mean to dissuade anyone from this understanding of things, except in one regard, to

suggest that somehow we can also think of the Kingdom of Heaven as present, somehow in our midst?

These parables teach less about the nature of the divine realm and more about the fact of it; less about the specific elements that characterize it and more about its value. The implications include that not only is the Kingdom of Heaven real and precious, but present . . . as near as the kitchen table or the garden behind the house or the field at the edge of town.

There is a paradox here, in which two seemingly contradictory things are both nonetheless true; God is near and God is far away. Life on earth has many blessings but also many hardships; it is freely given but costly and precious; it comes with suffering, but it nurtures, heals, restores, and blesses us, simultaneously.

The parables give us a way to see beyond the surface. The seed is not just a seed, it is a great tree with a whole ecological system in its branches. The dough is not just wet flour, the yeast is not merely another fungus. Put them together and they are a part of an abundant feast beyond compare.

The field looks like any other field, but although it is not visible from a distance, there is a treasure buried in it beyond price. You can't tell a clam by its shell. It is a *gift* to be able to encounter this aspect of life. It begins with its proclamation, which seems to be what these

parables are all about: Jesus proclaiming the astonishing, and astonishingly present, grace of God.

We use words to communicate the things of God; creation, imago dei, sin, reconciliation, justification, sanctification, incarnation, trinity, eternal life, etc. Sometimes we over-use or clumsily use these words and bore ourselves to tears, but we use them anyway because we have been instructed to use them, and we listen to them because they speak to us of truths about life we can't hear from other sources. We pay attention.

Just that gives a special quality to the words of Jesus, who tells stories and creates images in our minds to help us to pay attention, to understand that we have been wonderfully made and given a beautiful world in which to live; and to see that we are loved and accepted by the one who made us.

And to know that even in the midst of hardships too great to bear, the seed germinates and grows; the yeast multiplies in its mysterious way and causes the dough to rise; and the treasure hidden, the pearl of great price sit waiting to be found.

Let these stories encourage us as we journey through life. They speak of the source of our lives and character, our morality, and our hope. They nudge us on because they are *grace*, thus they bear us no burden, rather they liberate us from all that weighs us down. One can hear Jesus say, "is not life, more than what you think it is? Amen.

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