

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 26, 2020

Introduction

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continues to instruct his disciples about the nature of the Kingdom using parables. Instead of story like parables [last week's *Parable of the Sower and the Soils*], Jesus turns to parables that are short, concise, and to the point. Those who study story and language call these statements '***apothegms.***' Today, we encounter three such apothegms. They begin with: '***The Kingdom of heaven is like . . .***'

I believe that parables with extended stories are easier to understand because they draw the listener/reader into a story that changes because of an unconventional or unexpected twist which forces one to make a decision about whether or not they agree or disagree with the point being made. Story parables often use a 'literary hook' to engage the listener/reader. For example, consider the *Parable of the Lost Sons* in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. I can identify with both the younger and elder siblings. The hook in this story is that that miscreant is graciously received by the Parent while the self-righteous, stay-at-home sibling refuses the gracious invitation to the welcome home party in progress.

Apothegms are short statements intended to evoke a response. Listeners/readers must decide immediately whether or not they accept the premise of the parable. Some of these one liners make a statement about the Kingdom. Today, Jesus describes the Kingdom as a mustard seed and a woman leavening flour for bread. Then he changes themes and talks about the Kingdom using the images of a treasure or a pearl of great worth which a person sells everything to possess.

Both styles of parables are meant to evoke a reaction from those who hear or read them. Be open to the possibilities. In the sermon '***A Little Bit of Luck***' that follows, you will see where these one-liners have led me.

Pastoral Note: We will be having two outdoor worship services at Bethel in their parking lot on the First and Third Sundays in August [8/2 & 8/16] at 9:30am. These services will be at Bethel Lutheran because of their portable sound system. You will be formally notified when plans are coordinated.

Some of you may be wondering when we will be able to worship in our sanctuaries. I cannot answer that question. I know that right now I am very reticent about going into a closed building for worship; especially with the current surge in Covid-

19 infection rates. In many states, churches have been identified as places where infections continue to be easily spread. I believe that patience is of the essence for both your and my safety. **Please continue to be safe: Social distance and wear masks. May God bless you.**

In Christ ✝, Pastor Steve

Gospel – Matthew 13:31–33, 44–46, & 51–52

³¹[Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it 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.”

³³He 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 . . . ⁴⁴The 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.

⁴⁵Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it ... ⁵¹Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵²And 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 Prayer

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells a series of parables that liken the Kingdom to a small mustard seed that grows into the mightiest of shrubs and yeast hidden away in one hundred pounds of dough that will make enough bread to feed a small town. Jesus then uses the metaphor of a treasure in a field and a pearl of great price to encourage his hearers to seek the Kingdom above all else. In each parable, Jesus places great emphasis not only on seeking the Kingdom, but also on the joy of finding it. In Psalm 27, we find a prayer of one such seeker. Let us pray.

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after;

that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,

to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
he will set me high upon a rock.
And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies round about me;
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
Hear, O LORD when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
Thou hast said, "Seek ye my face." My heart says to thee,
"Thy face, LORD, do I seek."
Hide not thy face from me. Cast me not off, forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living!
Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
yea, wait for the LORD. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Zvenigorod was a small town in eastern Russia that had few claims to fame. At best, it was an agricultural center, but nothing more. Yet, there was one thing that brought people from far and near: *the beautiful icon of Christ that hung in the cathedral.* An icon is a picture; and in the Orthodox Church, an icon is regarded as something holy . . . Something that brings those who behold it into the very presence of God.

This icon was very old. It was the work of Andrei Rublev, an artist who lived nearly 600 years ago in heartland of Russia. He is considered to be one of the masters of the art form. Rublev named his new icon 'The Savior of Zvenigorod.' But the name didn't stick. It soon became known as 'The Peacemaker' because the image of Christ brought a sense of comfort and peacefulness to all who saw it. With a love beyond explanation, the Lord's eyes pierced the hearts of those who saw the icon. It was said that all who looked upon the icon of the Savior were touched by God's own peace.

Soon, 'The Peacemaker' became an object of devotion. And for nearly 600 years, the loving the loving face of Christ beheld a world broken by sin. But things

changed during the turmoil of World War I and the Russian Revolution. The icon disappeared and many thought that it had been destroyed.

In 1918, relative peace finally came to the area. A man named Vasili Kurokov, returned to the ruined buildings of Zvenigorod. Exploring a barn near the cathedral, he turned over one of the boards used as a step. His eyes widened in amazement. Staring up at him was the face of the Savior painted by Rublev. The missing ‘*Peacemaker*’ had been found. A ‘*little bit of luck*’ or not? Or, was it divine providence? Who knows? Whatever the case, the ‘*Peacemaker*’ returned to where he should be.

There’s probably a bit of fable in this Russian story; but it has a nice feel to it. In today’s Gospel, Jesus sets a full smorgasbord of images about the Kingdom before us. Jesus said, “**THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE YEAST THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD . . . [AND] THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A MERCHANT IN SEARCH OF FINE PEARLS. . .**” And, more often than not, we pick and choose between the images that appeal to us. But I don't think that is what our Lord intended. These parables belong together . . . and together, they tell us something unique about the very nature of God and his Kingdom. Let's look at them carefully.

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Kingdom is likened to this smallest of all seeds. In a short time, the dust-like seeds of the mustard plant give way to a magnificent shrub that even provides shelter for the birds of the air. Note what happens in the parable: *the Kingdom is sown into the world by God, not human agency.* The seed is small and it appears as if nothing is happening. But like the mustard seed: ***That which starts out*** so insignificantly in Bethlehem's stable and seemingly ends so tragically on Calvary's cross, comes to full bloom in Jesus' resurrection.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is about inconspicuous beginnings and magnificent endings. One need only to look at the hidden church that grew secretly in Soviet Russia even though Stalin and those who followed him tried to destroy it. This parable is about the growth of the Kingdom. Note that we make no decisions here; ***God does it all and the Kingdom grows.*** The Kingdom will bloom in its fullness and there is nothing we can do either to hinder it or help it. The

Kingdom of God has already been born among us . . . and like the mustard plant, it will reach magnificent proportions.

In the Parable of the Yeast, Jesus suggests another way of looking at the Kingdom.

The yeast is hidden away within three measures of flour and, when the rest of the ingredients are added, it leavens the whole lump of dough. The key here is the quantity. The three measures of flour will give over a hundred pounds of dough . . . That's enough bread to feed a multitude of people. In parabolic terms, it's enough bread for God's great victory feast when we all celebrate the victory over evil.

Think in the language of the parable. If Jesus means that the Kingdom of God is the leaven, then the flour is the world. And when mixed together in an appropriate way, something begins to happen: the dough is transformed into bread. Just as the flour is no longer just flour, so the world is no longer just the world. God is at work. Again, no decisions on our part. Like Rublev's icon . . . It is there but hidden from view. The Kingdom has already been mixed into our world, and contrary to what we might think, God is at work, right now, transforming our sinful existence into something far better. And that is good news! That is grace in action.

Then Jesus challenges his hearers with a different set of images. 'THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD . . . AGAIN, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A MERCHANT IN SEARCH OF FINE PEARLS . . .' In its own way, each parable deals with something found: *a treasure and a pearl*. In each instance, there seems to be an element of luck; the laborer *unexpectedly found* the treasure in the field and the merchant came upon the pearl of great worth. But there is more here than meets the eye. This is not about good luck. These '*parables of the Kingdom*' reveal the very nature of God.

In the Parable of the Treasure, Jesus was thinking of a treasure hidden in a jar.

Because of repeated invasions, refugees often hid their valuables in jars and buried them in the earth. When the armies left, the owners returned to claim their goods. In Jesus' parable, a common laborer found just such a treasure. We miss the point if we debate whether or not he should have told the field's owner about the treasure. The laborer did not. Instead, he went out, sold everything he had, bought the field, and made the treasure his own.

The Parable of the Pearl is similar. Its only difference is that the merchant is looking for a fine pearl. He carefully evaluates each one that comes into his hands. He will know the pearl when he finds it. Like the laborer, he will sell everything he has to possess it.

Certainly, this is the stuff of good stories, but Jesus does not allow us that pleasure. The man stumbles upon a treasure . . . The merchant finds a pearl of great worth . . . Both then act decisively on their good luck. In their joy, they sell everything they have just to possess what they have found. Jesus' point is that the Kingdom has a way of surprising us. God is not predictable; his treasures and his pearls come in many different forms . . . Treasures that have a way of suddenly appearing at our feet and pearls that come our way when we least expect them.

You see? There is no escape . . . God will not let us be. In the first case, those who are just going about their lives and minding their own business, suddenly stumble upon a treasure. And in the second, those who are searching for something to give their lives meaning, suddenly see a heaven-sent pearl. Be it treasure or pearl . . . Be it unlooked for or sought out, God encounters us in the person of the living Christ. Today, these encounters come to us in the witness of others, in the Scripture, in the preaching of the Word, and in the Sacraments.

The Good News for us is that we have many fields yet to walk through. And in his mercy, God has indiscriminately sprinkled them with hidden treasures. Pearls of great worth abound because they are the coin of the realm. And what's more, God wants them to be found. So much so that they almost seem to get in our way. But then, what else can we expect from a gracious God who would rather forgive than judge?

Consider the story of long-lost icon. For many years, Rublev's 'Peacemaker' was missing. War and famine ravished tiny Zvenigorod. It appeared that Christ had abandoned his people with the loss of his icon. But such was not the case. By chance, a man turned over a rotting board in a broken-down barn and he found the missing image of Christ. Some said it was luck; but others knew that luck had little to do with it. ***Christ wanted to be found.***

Today, the icon has been restored. Those serene eyes proclaim the same powerful message: ***the living Christ still rules.*** Sin and human brokenness cannot destroy him. His Gospel of peace and redemption will be proclaimed so that everyone

might hear it. And thus, it is with our lives. Although unseen, the living Christ is also among us. He is the hidden treasure and the great pearl waiting to be found — He is the Christ hidden in the rotting ruins of our lives. The good news for you and me is that he will be found because he wills it to be so. Luck plays no part whatsoever. ***Christ wants to be found.*** Therefore, like the laborer in the field, our joy will be full, if we but open our eyes. Amen.