

July 24, 2011

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Thy Kingdom Come on Earth

When we watch TV, when we drive down the road, when we're on facebook, we see ads--- ads that often seem to promise a better life, more fun, more money, all of our dreams come true. A better job, a nicer house, a better way to spend time, a more exciting vacation----

A healthier body, a more active life, parties that are more fun, clothes that look better on you. It goes on and on.

Did you ever stop to wonder if all of that were really true, that if you had the best, the most, the most amazing life ever---would that be the Kingdom of Heaven?

Every week we pray together the Lord's Prayer. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." But do we ever stop to think about just what it is that we are praying for?

What is the Kingdom of heaven? We pray those words by rote, part of our earliest memorization. But will we ever know if that prayer is answered if we don't know what the Kingdom of heaven is like?

A couple of minutes ago I read a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew that recounts some of the parables Jesus told to teach people what the Kingdom of heaven is like.

The images he chose have nothing to do with glamour or being fashionable or money or romance or having everything we could ever want. The images he chose were things his listeners knew about and could relate to--- mustard plants, a woman mixing yeast into flour to make bread, a hidden treasure found in a field, and finding a fine pearl worth everything you own.

He didn't talk about streets paved with gold or pearly gates or God as a mighty king sitting on a throne with the hem of his garment filling the temple. He didn't talk about wealth or fine clothes.

Even when he spoke of the treasure found in a field, it was not in terms of how rich the person who found it became. The point was that the treasure was worth EVERYTHING the person had, so that he sold it all to

buy that field that held the treasure. The finder was willing to give up everything to gain the Kingdom of Heaven.

The merchant who found the pearl of great price also gave up everything else just to have that single pearl--- just to gain the Kingdom of Heaven.

But what was the point with the mustard plant and the yeast in the bread?

Two everyday things, two common things, two unexpected images for The Kingdom of heaven.

A mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds in nature, could be easily overlooked in a bag of seed. A farmer might carefully plant his field with what seemed to be pure wheat, only to find later on that there are mustard plants growing up among the grain. Mustard plants were considered to be weeds then, and they still grow wild in many places, including up in our own California hills. They grow up tall and spread out into a bush, and little birds can find shelter in them.

So how is a mustard seed like the Kingdom of Heaven?

Maybe because you don't expect it. It grows where it will, quickly, and provides shelter to those little birds who are often overlooked by people, but yet need shelter and food and care. God is taking care of some of the littlest ones in the kingdom of heaven, and to know that is to know that we will not be overlooked either.

And how is a woman putting yeast in a batch of dough like the Kingdom of Heaven? Here Jesus uses a feminine image, one that might easily be taken for granted in a time when every woman made bread every day, and that might be a clue.

After all, he often said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is among you, near you, within you." This parable can be a reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven is not far off, but right here where we live.

Both a mustard seed and yeast are very small, and they have the ability to become big, to grow, to become something that can shelter and can sustain life, provide God's care and nourishment. They are both seen everywhere and not hard to find.

For us, today, what would those kinds of images be? Seeds are obvious to everyone. You might not see a dandelion seed land in your lawn, but you know how they spring up! So is the Kingdom of heaven like a dandelion seed?

After all, little birds can eat the seeds and people sometimes eat the greens! Most of us would not think of dandelions as a gift in any way, but then, the farmers in Jesus' day probably weren't too appreciative of the mustard plants among their grain, either.

Very few of us bake our own bread these days, so what other image comes to mind that relates to cooking?

The one that comes to my mind is rice.

You take a cupful of rice, and how much bigger does it get when it's cooked? A small amount of dry grain becomes enough to feed more people than a lot of people would guess!

Is the Kingdom of Heaven like that? Expanding to meet the needs of more people than you might think? Giving strength and sustenance to people, a metaphor for God's care?

Maybe it's easier for us to try to think of something that is worth selling all we possess! Or maybe not.

What would you trade for the Kingdom of Heaven?

I think this brings me back to my original question! What is the Kingdom of Heaven and how do we know how much it's worth to us?

Are we like the rich young man who asked Jesus what he had to do to gain the Kingdom, and who went away sad when Jesus told him to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow?

I think that just might be where we are.

It's too hard to think about giving up homes and jobs and savings accounts, cars and clothes and financial security---- especially when we're not even sure what this Kingdom of heaven is like.

So I want to describe it the best way I can. I am not so good at parables, but I can speak plainly---

The Kingdom of Heaven is where everyone has enough----not any extra, not a huge reserve, not hungry, but not overfilled either. Where no one is in need while others have more than enough, but everyone shares with everyone else. Where people live simply so that others may simply live.

The Kingdom of Heaven is where the rich do not try to get richer, but instead share their wealth, and the poor do not have to stand begging on the street, but have enough to eat and a roof over their heads at night.

The Kingdom of Heaven is where we don't see ads to help starving children or abused animals on tv, because all children have enough to eat and all animals are cared for.

We don't see ads to entice us to buy more and more and more, either, because no one wants more than they need, and everyone has what they need, no more and no less.

The Kingdom of heaven is where all kinds of people live in peace and harmony together, appreciating each other's differences and knowing how all their gifts and talents work together for the good of all.

The Kingdom of heaven is a place without fear---no fear of people who are different or ideas that seem strange. No fear that someone

different will get into power and make changes that will ruin the peace or cost more money.

No fear that someone will blow up a bomb in the city or shoot dozens of children dead in the countryside.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a place where love reigns----living in the light of God's love, all people love one another, and that love is lived out in very practical, incarnational ways 24/7, 365, year after year after year.

So, what would you give to live there?

Because if we're praying for that Kingdom of heaven to come, we had better be ready for it. We might even need to take action for that prayer to become reality.

We might have to stop thinking about our own individual desires and wants, and start thinking about how to work toward everyone having what they need.

This church is, I think, close to the Kingdom of Heaven, or, rather, I should say that The Kingdom of Heaven is close to us, nearer to us than we might think.

When we worship together, pray together, eat together, I think we do very well as a community, as a small piece of the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we have a common goal of supporting a missions project, we also do very well, and any other time we share a common goal, a common vision.

But there are ways we can grow in our capacity to bring the Kingdom of Heaven closer.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, the priority is the community together. In the Book of Acts, the members of the church sold what they had and gave it to the church community so that there was no deficit budget,

no worry about how the month's bills would be paid, no need to turn the hungry away, no need to limit what the church could do to make disciples for the transformation of the world.

No one ever said, That's a good idea, but I don't see how we are going to pay for it. No one ever doubted that what needed to be done, could be done.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, I don't think anyone says that they don't know how to serve others and then lets someone else do the work. I think everyone knows what their spiritual gifts are and how to use them, so this fall I will be offering classes and preaching about spiritual gifts so that we will all know the ways that we are called to serve God together, our strengths and our weaknesses complementing each other's to bring the Kingdom of heaven closer.

And this is a good beginning for putting ourselves where our prayer takes us, for acting like we mean what we pray week after week.

If we know what the Kingdom of heaven is like, and we do what we can to bring it closer through our own intentional actions, then maybe we will see the answer to the prayer that we pray every week---Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

As the Body of Christ, we need to expand our work in this direction.
Let us continue!

Amen.