

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like That”

Sunday, July 27, 2008—Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Romans 8:26-39

*Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church*

For the past few weeks, we have been looking at some of the stories Jesus told about the Kingdom of Heaven. A sower went out to sow, spreading seed everywhere. Wheat and weeds grow together in the field, until the final harvest. You’ll recall that when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, he wasn’t just talking about what happens to us after we die. The Kingdom of Heaven exists right now. It began when Jesus came among us; it continues today. Of course, the kingdom has not yet arrived in its fullness; that is why Jesus taught us to pray for its coming. But the kingdom is here, incomplete though it may be, and it is in progress. The Kingdom of Heaven is what the world would look like if God were fully in charge, rather than the rulers of this world.

Jesus tells us we can see this Kingdom of Heaven, if we are paying attention. And then he gives us a few hints about what to be looking for, if we want to see it. This morning he tells five very brief stories: the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net of fish. They are so brief that they are less like stories than they are like little vignettes—flashes of insight, images or glimpses of God’s kingdom and God’s rule.

Several images keep coming back. The Kingdom of Heaven is hidden, it is always surprising, and it is unimaginably valuable. A man stumbles upon buried treasure in a yard, then rushes out and sells everything he has to buy the field. A pearl merchant looks for pearls, then finds one many times more valuable than he ever imagined. A tiny mustard seed begins small, and ends up being a tree large enough for birds to roost in. A woman mixes yeast dough for bread. A tiny amount of yeast mixes with a huge amount of flour, and she ends up with enough to feed a small army. The yeast episode is one of my favorites; it reminds me of an episode that appeared many years ago on a TV series called “I Love Lucy”. Lucy decides to bake her own bread for dinner. Being somewhat inexperienced in these matters, she mistakenly uses thirteen cakes of yeast rather than three called for in the recipe. Sometime later, she returns to the kitchen as the delicious smell of home-baked bread begins to waft from the oven. Expecting to see the results of her labors in a small and compact shape, she opens the oven door, only to find an enormous, slithering, foaming, seemingly unstoppable and never ending loaf of bread emerging from the oven. It keeps coming and coming until Lucy and her friend have to race outside to keep from being overtaken. Yes, the Kingdom of God is like that, always surprising, not what you’d expect. Mostly it begins with something small and hidden, but then it expands to something magnificent and uncontrollable and irresistible.

Each of these vignettes features people involved in ordinary, day-to-day activities. A man planting seeds in his field. A woman baking bread at home. A pearl merchant looking for pearls to sell. Fishermen fishing. Can you see yourself in these images, as you go about doing what you do every day: taking care of our homes and families, going to work, doing our errands? This is where the Kingdom of Heaven is hidden, Jesus says, in plain sight, in the daily rhythms and events of daily life. We only need eyes to see. A willingness to be surprised.

So where have you seen the Kingdom of Heaven recently? Jesus said repeatedly that children have a special awareness of God's kingdom, a special ability to see it and to understand it. In fact, he went so far as to say to his followers, who were busy bickering with each other about who among them was the most important, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

So it follows, I think, that if we want to see the Kingdom of Heaven, we should be paying close attention when we are around children. Because they will show us this hidden, surprising, precious way of life that is God's gift to us. I've always thought that when Jesus talked about our becoming more like little children, he was talking primarily about our ability to be trusting, but this week, at our annual Vacation Bible School, I gained some new insights.

On Wednesday, the topic at Vacation Bible School was forgiveness. The story was Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, whose massive debt was forgiven by his master. The forgiven servant then refused to forgive another man who owed him a relatively small sum.

I began my discussion time with the children by asking them to share their experiences of having had their feelings hurt by others. First surprise: Pretty much everyone had an experience they wanted to share. My brother pushed me and I fell down and broke my arm. My sister took my favorite toy and lost it, and when we found it, it was broken. My best friend talked about me behind my back. I thought she was my friend but she said mean things about me to other people.

Children haven't yet gotten the idea that our vulnerability to hurt is something secret and shameful. The stories went on and on. I could have filled the entire time with these stories, all told without so much as a hint of embarrassment. The kingdom of Heaven is like that. Pain is shared with others, not hidden.

Next we talked about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not excusing someone else's bad behavior, it's about letting go of our desire to retaliate, releasing our wish to get back at others who hurt us. The children knew it was difficult. No surprise there. The surprise came when we started talking about how long it took to forgive. Some said, one or two minutes. The longest time period mentioned was a week.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. Children, for the most part, don't hold grudges. It's the adults who say, when they feel slighted, that what happened was unforgivable. We say: I'll never go back there after what they did. I'll never speak to her again after what she said. I'll show them, They'll be sorry. But forgiveness and reconciliation are the very heart of the kingdom of Heaven, because forgiving us is at the heart what God has done for us. On Wednesday, I got a little glimpse of the kingdom. Or perhaps I should say, the children got it; they showed it to me.

Of course, if you don't get to be around children, there are still many other places we can see the Kingdom of Heaven. I've seen it in the hospital. During the summer I spent as a chaplain at a Chicago hospital I met a middle-aged man who had just had surgery for prostate cancer. He told me that before his diagnosis, he was dating a woman of whom he had become very fond. When he learned he had cancer, he stopped calling her, convinced

that she would want nothing more to do with him in his condition and not wanting to add her rejection to the list of things he was worried about. When he went for his surgery, they hadn't seen each other for weeks. Through mutual friends, the woman tracked him down in the hospital. She showed up in his room unannounced, having driven over two hundred miles to get there, with a basket of his favorite snacks, a picture of her for his shelf, and, he told me in amazement, "she practically hasn't left my side since." The only reason she wasn't with him at that moment, he said, was because she had gone shopping to make sure he had groceries in his refrigerator when he returned from the hospital. They became engaged while he was in the hospital.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. God comes to us, surprisingly, unexpectedly, seeks us out when we are at our weakest and most vulnerable. God finds us when we are feeling our ugliest and most unlovable. God comes among all the unlovely things of this world, the stitches and the bandages and the rawest of wounds, the ones we are convinced will never heal, the ones we fear will make people forever turn away from us in disgust. God fills the room and whispers, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Not surgery, not pain, not fear of rejection, not even death itself. As Paul put it in our first reading this morning: "For I am convinced, that neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38).

My patient was not a religious man, hadn't been in a church in years, but he found God there, in the hospital. He hadn't said a prayer in a long time, but that day God put one in his heart and he spoke it out loud. It was just a few words: Thank you. Thank you. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. It doesn't take any special words to talk about it. Thank you is enough.

Do you see why the man who found the buried treasure in the field sold all that he had to buy the field? Do you see why the pearl merchant sold all that he had to buy this one priceless pearl? If you were that man in the hospital, facing your mortality and wondering if anyone will ever love you, what would it be worth to you, to know that there is One who wants to love you and share your life forever? God's Kingdom is like that. It's worth everything, knowing how much God loves us, knowing God will never leave us.

God has planted that smallest of seeds in each one of us, the seed of God's love and the healing it brings to each of us. And God has also planted in us the seeds of gratitude, so we can go into the world, thanking God by doing for others what God has done for us. That's how the tiniest seeds become giant shrubs, that's how the single cake of yeast makes loaves enough to feed multitudes.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. It fills us to overflowing. So we have to share it. May it be so, for you and for me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.