



Pentecost 8-July 26, 2020
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Two weeks ago, we heard that Jesus taught his disciples by using parables. The first parable that Jesus taught was the parable of the sower. After telling his disciples about the seed and four types of soil, it was apparent the disciples didn't understand what he was talking about or was teaching them, so he sat them down and explained the parable of the sower. Last week we heard Jesus continue his teaching with the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Once again, the disciples didn't understand what he was teaching them. It was again clear to Jesus that they didn't understand, but Jesus waited until they admitted their ignorance and asked Jesus for an explanation. Today, Jesus fires five more parables to these learning disciples. Today however, Jesus doesn't explain these parables and the crowds don't ask for an explanation. Jesus tests their learning after hearing this parable by asking them, “Have you understood all this?” They responded, “Yes”. I'm not convinced that their response of “Yes” was given with much confidence. I rather suspect that if Jesus had further asked his disciples, “Then what do these parables mean?” these disciples would have been speechless to explain these 5 parables that all begin with the words **the kingdom of heaven is like**.*

Jesus already had told his disciples that he taught in parables not so that people understand, but so that some of them wouldn't. This peculiar use of parables for teaching was prophesied by Isaiah who said, “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will look and never perceive.” It seems that this problem of listening and not understanding has not gone away and maybe has become worse in our time.

After my grandson's coach-pitch baseball game this week, we went through the nearby Dairy Queen drive-through for an after-the-game treat. After giving the worker our order, we should have asked the question that Jesus asked his disciples, “Have you understood all of this?” When we got to the window to pick-up our treats, what was given was “like” what we ordered since it was ice cream, but none of the orders were exactly what was ordered. We attempted to correct some of the mistakes by asking the worker face to face, “We want one medium soft-serve chocolate dish of ice cream.” As soon as we made the order, the worker responded, “What size?” After hearing this, we knew there was a problem with understanding. Instead of confronting the worker again about the mistakes, we decided we better just eat whatever we got.

The reason Jesus said some people wouldn't understand parables isn't because Jesus doesn't speak clearly or that we are hard of hearing. There are some things that Jesus chooses to keep hidden from us. The apostle Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 13:12 of how some things are hidden from us

when he said, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." So, when Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven, he spoke in parables to give us only a glimpse of what heaven is like. The parables about the kingdom of heaven give us a taste of what heaven is like.

English teachers would say that Jesus used similes to describe the kingdom of heaven. Similes are figures of speech which compare one thing with another thing of a different kind to make the description more vivid by using the words "like" or "as". In these five short parables, Jesus said, **the kingdom of heaven is like...** Although the disciples said they understood what Jesus was teaching, I suspect their understanding was about as accurate as our orders at the Dairy Queen.

The five parables that Jesus puts before the disciples have the kingdom of heaven in common, but they seem to teach different things about the kingdom. The first two parables dealing with the mustard seed and the yeast describe how the kingdom of heaven starts as something very small and then spreads to a large area. Maybe today, Jesus might say the kingdom of heaven is like the coronavirus which began as one virus but has now spread throughout the world. Jesus teaches that his preached word will spread to places beyond our control just as the yeast goes throughout the bread or makes branches in the vast mustard tree.

The next two parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl say something different about what the kingdom of heaven is like. These two parables teach about how searching and finding relate to the kingdom of heaven. Many times, I have heard preachers speak about how the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that we would sell all that we have to acquire the treasure of heaven as the person who bought the field who found the hidden treasure. In the parable of the pearl, some understand this to mean that we value the kingdom of heaven that we would see everything we have to purchase it. Jesus might ask us, "Is this how you understand these parables?" If this is what this parable is about, then you would think we all would know of someone who has actually sold everything they have and trusted that God would take care of all their needs until they were brought into the kingdom of heaven. But I don't know of ANYONE who has done this. This parable makes more sense if we are the treasure hidden in the field and we are the fine pearl and Jesus sells all that he has to claim us for his kingdom. Jesus is the only one I know who emptied himself of everything and has paid the price for you and I so that we can enter his kingdom. Even if we think we stumbled on the treasure in the field or accidentally found the great pearl, that puts us in control in finding the kingdom of heaven. Like the disciples we want to turn the meaning of parables around to think they are a roadmap to find Jesus rather than the uncontrollable unexpected result of his word finding and choosing us.

The final parable of the net thrown into the sea sounds similar to the parable that Jesus just told about the wheat and the weeds. Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned about sorting out the good fish from the bad fish before bringing them to the shore. Again, this parable teaches about Jesus being in control of his kingdom. There is no decision left for the fish to be caught in the net. But when Jesus asked his disciples, "Have you understood ALL this?" They said, "Yes."

There are many things that I don't understand about the kingdom of heaven and the older I get the less I focus on the things I don't understand and I simply trust in what I do know. In these parables, Jesus gives us wonderful glimpses, dim though they may be, of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The good news for you is that God's word has spread out to you like a mustard seed or like yeast. His word has found you. Jesus has paid the price for you and has given you his kingdom and what today we only see dimly, one day will be even more amazing than we could ever imagine. Amen.