

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

What the Kingdom of Heaven Demands

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Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it 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."

He 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."

"The 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.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And 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."

We have been reading portions of today's Gospel for many years. Until 2006 it ended with the sorting of fish. There was no mention of angels and fire. When it ended that way I invariably preached on faith and pointed out that when I was a boy most girls had a necklace with a mustard seed¹ in it.

In 2006 we expanded the Gospel so that the text now includes some very harsh passages on judgment. At the end of the reading we learn that the Kingdom of God is like fisherman separating the good fish from the junk fish: The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The separation of the good fish from the junk fish is a reference to judgment but Matthew wanted to make the reference clearer. He wanted us to know that our decision for or against the Kingdom has consequences. It's not a neutral choice. It's not a choice that we can make in a small way. These parables are meant to drive home the sacrificial and total commitment we as Christians are to have to the Kingdom of Heaven if we wish to be included in it.

This is not an Episcopalian way of doing things, of course. In our church we frequently behave as if the only sin an Episcopalian can commit is the sin of being tacky. The Gospels call us to be Christians first and Episcopalians second. The Gospels call us to be Christians first and Americans second. Indeed, the Gospels call us to be Christians first and everything else second. Unfortunately too many of us behave as if we are everything else first and Christians when it is

¹ The Mustard Seed Necklace was rooted in Matthew 17:20 where we read of faith the size of a mustard seed.

convenient or nice. The church after all is about being nice isn't it? The church after all is about ministering to my needs isn't it? The church after all is about making me feel good isn't it?

This section of parables starts off very positively and will make us feel good. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that when planted sprouts into a bush that can accommodate a flock of birds. So the Kingdom of Heaven has room for all of us and that is good news.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a measure of yeast. We don't know how it works (actually some of us probably do) but it works to leaven the bread. We can all buy this. It's a nice parable. But I think that parables exist to make us uncomfortable so let me push on the niceness. If the yeast is in us then it is meant to transform us and not we the yeast. There should be a visible sign that the yeast has conformed us to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. Someone finds the treasure and sells all that he has to purchase the field to possess the treasure and be enriched. Sounds good until we examine the ethics of this passage. Suppose I found the treasure in your field and didn't tell you about it but instead bought the field from you and exploited the treasure. Are you a fool for not knowing it was there or am I dishonest for not informing you of the treasure in your field? The parable is morally troubling. Could Jesus have told a morally compromised story and used it as a positive example? Apparently he could. We've heard the story so many times that we don't notice the moral compromise, but it's there. What do we do with it? The parables not only exist to make us uncomfortable but to make us talk about issues of justice. I cannot make this parable nice. The original owner of the field sustains a loss. Clearly the new owner knew the value of the prize and he was willing to do anything to get it. How then ought we to behave? I'll have to leave that as a question for now.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a fine pearl, which a merchant discovers and sells all that he has to possess. No one is defrauded in this parable. But the importance of devoting one's entire self to the Kingdom is affirmed.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea. We have known for years about the harm tuna fleets have caused to dolphins and turtles drowned in the nets. So imagine the net as an indiscriminating force drawing all of us in but only some of us are keepers while others of us are cast aside. Who are the keepers and who are those cast aside? The preceding parables make this clear. Those who are kept are those who show signs of having been leavened, of having sold all that they have to purchase the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price.

So, what does this have to do with you and me?

The Gospel tells us frequently that Jesus has a preference for the poor. This preference is not due to any virtue on the part of the poor but it is based on the innocence of the poor. They have no delusion that they are in control. The Gospel tells us clearly that if we want to be on the side of the Kingdom of Heaven then we must care for the poor. If we read on into the Gospel to Matthew 25 we find:

37 The righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it

that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?
39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

We are challenged to see how we treat the poor as how we show that we are leavened or willing to sell all that we have to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. How are we doing?

Fortunately for you I have no idea how you're doing. All I can do this morning is challenge you to think about it. I do however, have a very strong idea of how our nation is doing. It troubles me mightily that those who seem the clearest that we're a Christian nation, and we are not, are those who are also clear that the children from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador must be sent back immediately to their homelands despite the horror that caused them to make the treacherous journey here. We are spoiling our opportunity to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the sick and in prison. We have recently become clear that Muslims, particularly from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflict areas, are not welcome regardless of their age. By banning them we are spoiling our opportunity to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the sick and in prison. Apparently the transgendered, gay and lesbians also threaten our security and they must be excluded, thereby spoiling another opportunity to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the sick and in prison.

I devoted much of my life to working with the homeless so I have strong opinions about what it takes to seriously carry out mission. All too often, and this is true in Westport and Weston where I live that the primary commandment is "God helps he who helps himself" which is used to excuse cutting outreach budgets. The first sermon I ever preached to a congregation in the fall of 1984 cited this text as the theme of my sermon. After the sermon I met with my supervisor, the Rector of the Church², for his reaction to my sermon. It was well received by the congregation and I expected him to congratulate me on a job well done. Instead he asked me where in the bible this text occurs. When I entered seminary in 1973 as a cradle Episcopalian, I had never read the bible and I expected that I would leave seminary without ever reading it. So in September 1974 I was ignorant of the bible. I told him that I thought it occurred in Romans. He asked me where? I went home read Romans in Greek and then in several translations and couldn't find it. When I went back to him he referred me to Bartlett's Familiar Quotations where I found that Ben Franklin is the source. It is indeed as I've learned since, antithetical to the Gospel. Congregations excuse their lack of financial support of issues of poverty, by saying that they must be good stewards of their money. Or they say "we must look after our own first." This too is lacking in the bible and indeed is totally contrary to the sense of the bible. This means that we give out of our excess and if we have no excess we don't give. The Gospels do not expect us to give charity, that is, to give from our excess but instead to give of our substance. Of course this seems to me that we

² The Rev. William Opel, D.Ed., Sometime Rector of St. John's Broadcreek, MD

don't take the Gospel seriously. We take belonging to a church seriously, but not the Gospel.

The question is, when we talk about how we see the Kingdom of Heaven do we mean that everyone in it will look like you and me and be securely housed and well educated or do we mean that part of being leavened, the cost paid for the great treasure or the pearl beyond price, is how we treat the poor?

Jesus is clear in Matthew that if we want to encounter him and have a life with meaning then we find him unified with the poor, sick, refugees and in prison. Any other place we look for him might give us comfort but it will not give us Jesus. Only in Christ do we find out who and whose we are. In other words are we Christian first and everything else second or are we practical, pragmatic and success oriented in which case we are Christian when it is convenient. Meaning lies with Christ first. All else might be good religion but it is weak Christianity. In my 1st 3 weeks with you the Gospels talked about how we are the church without much that had overt political implications. Each week I was able to conclude with a statement that our faith should give us joy. We should enjoy our Christianity. This week Matthew tells us what that means. It means that you and I have been given a gift and the only way to keep that gift is to give it away and not simply agree that it should be shared but to share it. Joy comes with being the church with those who are vulnerable.

I don't always agree with Bishop Spong but he is quoted this week saying as he frequently has that Hell was invented to control us and strike fear in our hearts. While this morning's Gospel clearly talks of harsh judgment, Christianity as I understand it is about opportunity not loss and fear. We are called to live according to Matthew 25, to care for the sick, suffering, weak, hungry, imprisoned and refugees not so that we can lead a grim life but so that we will find a life with meaning and joy. I loved the work I did for 22 years and I enjoyed my clients. We are the church when we join with Christ in being one with the powerless.

The parable begins with the image of a mustard seed and bush. The bush can accommodate many birds. The reading ends with the separation of the good and bad fish and the reality of judgment. When we visualize that bush, who is in it?