

## What Is the Kingdom of Heaven?

8th Sunday after Pentecost

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Because of today's Gospel lesson, I have been struggling – that is not too strong a word – struggling over the past week to answer for myself the question, “What is the Kingdom of God” (which Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven)? I don't mean answer it in the vague sense that we answer most questions about important things in life – “Oh, I can't put it into words but I know what I think and feel and believe.” I mean answer it in the sense that I can put it into words so that someone else – a group of friends perhaps – can grasp what I am saying and respond to it and say what they think and start a conversation that leads to a deeper understanding for all of us. Come to think of it, that is the task of the preacher, isn't it? It is a hard task for sure. And I do want to say in passing that giving a sermon three times over the past three months has increased my respect and gratitude for my clergy friends Ed and Shelby and John and Roger and Edward and Rick and others like them. How did you do this every week for years?

I find as I read and re-read the gospels that my understanding of what Jesus says and does is enhanced by trying to hear and see his words and actions from the vantage point of the disciples, those flawed loyal followers who try and try but never seem to understand, not quite, what Jesus is about, but who know even in

their semi-light, semi-darkness, that whoever and whatever Jesus is, He holds the key not only to the meaning of their lives but to the meaning of Life itself. I think that they are my kind of Christians.

By the point reached in today's gospel, a lot has happened in the disciples' relationship with Jesus. They have listened to his teachings which Matthew organizes and summarizes as the Sermon on the Mount. They have witnessed miracles of healing and even of revival from the dead, they have seen him encounter the authorities primarily by breaking religious rules, and they have been sent out on their own to spread the good news and to heal and even raise the dead. Now they are back together with Jesus, and crowds are gathering, and Jesus for the first time specifically tells them about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Well, actually he tells them parables that reveal only aspects of the Kingdom. Immediately before today's gospel, he has told two parables, one comparing the kingdom with a sower and another comparing the kingdom with a field of wheat in which an enemy sows weeds.. A sower went out to sow, he says in the 1<sup>st</sup> parable, and some seed fell on the paths and withered, some on thin soil and grew up but didn't have enough moisture and nourishment and so withered also, some fell among thorns and the thorns choked the plants as they grew, and some fell on good soil and grew and yielded as much as 100 fold. Jesus tells his disciples – but not the crowds – that the soil represents different hearers of the

word: those who reject the word as soon as they hear it, those who respond enthusiastically but have no staying power, those who are choked by cares and worldly temptations, and those in whom the word takes root and grows and flourishes. In the 2nd parable, he tells them that a farmer's enemy planted weeds in the farmer's field and when the weeds grew up the farmer decided to let the weeds and wheat grow together until harvest time when the weeds would be thrown into the fire. Jesus leaves it to his disciples to interpret in the 2<sup>nd</sup> parable whom the wheat represents and whom the weeds. I think he may be testing their ability to understand parables.

The aspect of the kingdom Jesus is describing here says nothing about the kingdom itself except to reveal its essentially desirable nature. What Jesus does in the first parable is to describe the human response to the presence of the kingdom and to indicate that the spread of the kingdom depends on that human response. What he does in the 2<sup>nd</sup> parable is to suggest that wheat and weeds grow up together in this world represented by the field and that while eventually the weeds will be separated from the wheat we have to accept the fact of their presence. The weeds and the wheat will grow together until some unforeseeable future time.

One can imagine the disciples asking in some frustration, "Yes but what is the kingdom of heaven?" So Jesus tries again. And this time he gives them 5 short parables, so short that they lack narrative. So short that they sound more like

metaphors, or similes, simple comparisons of one thing to another. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. It starts out tiny and becomes huge. The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a cook puts in dough. It pushes and expands the other ingredients and creates bread. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure someone discovers in a field that is so valuable he sells everything he has and buys the field. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl so desirable that a merchant does what the new owner of the field has just done: sells all and buys the pearl. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net spread out over the water that gathers in all the fish around. All 5 of these comparisons describe limited aspects of the Kingdom. Like the mustard seed and the yeast, the Kingdom may be hidden, or it may seem little and insignificant when it first appears to human consciousness but it will grow and expand. Like the treasure in the field and the unique pearl, the Kingdom inspires in the person who truly perceives it a desire to have it that is so great nothing else seems of any value. Like the net, the Kingdom draws in everyone: there is no exclusion. A sidebar: Jesus uses the similarity between the Kingdom and the fishing net to comment on the day of judgment. We don't have time to deal with that now, but if we were to follow through with it, I would want to put it in the context of the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, the sheep and goats images of the last judgment in which Christ the Judge rewards those who dealt with him lovingly and kindly as he appeared to them in the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the hungry.

At the end of the lesson, Jesus, like a good teacher, asks his disciples if they understand, and they say yes. But do they, fully? Do we, fully?

As readers of this gospel, we are in chapter 13. As participants in the gospel, the disciples were in a figurative 13<sup>th</sup> chapter and had heard Jesus' teachings over chapters 5 through 7: The Sermon on the Mount. That teaching marathon is probably Matthew's compilation of many of Jesus' teachings over the years of his ministry, but putting them in this form provides us and the disciples with a bracing and daunting plunge into the elements of the Kingdom. Immediately before the Sermon on the Mount Matthew tells us that when Jesus emerged from his 40 days temptation in the wilderness he began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." So the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' first depiction of the Kingdom of Heaven. It gives his followers a new ethical system that reverses most of their assumptions about what matters.

The poor (Matthew says the poor in spirit) are blessed, so are the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who suffer for righteousness's sake. Our outer actions are irrelevant at best and harmful at worst if they do not grow out of our deepest and truest selves. We are to love our enemies as well as our friends. We are not to judge others. We are to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect. These are compelling ethical admonitions, but they are not themselves the kingdom of Heaven. What is needed to complete them, to turn them into the

kingdom of heaven, is the response of the hearers (which is, in fact, the point of the parable of the sower). Wouldn't the disciples – as well as the crowds who came to listen to Jesus – have found it difficult to reconcile Jesus' teachings with the real world in which the powerful dominate the meek, the rich control the poor, and success is defined as crushing your enemy before he crushes you. So those who hear Jesus' words almost inevitably find ways to compromise. There may be ways to live with this new ethical system without too much disruption or inconvenience in our daily lives. The disciples – most of whom, if not all, expected Jesus to reveal himself as the Messiah who would lead Israel into political autonomy by throwing off the power of Rome - surely found ways to modify the more radical of these radical teachings. It is the case that even after Jesus' resurrection – at the moment of his ascension – the writer of Acts tells us that the disciples ask Jesus when political power will be restored to Israel.

And don't we do the same? Don't we all have the tendency to try to fit Jesus' teachings into our preconceptions about the limits of life in this world? Jesus couldn't have meant literally that we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, could he? Could he? And if we can't be perfect, surely it is ok to find accommodations with the kingdom of this world. And then what do we do with the kingdom of heaven as Jesus depicts it here? How do we reconcile these teachings with our experience of what we call real life?

The most effective way to deal with it is just to say that the kingdom of heaven is different from our daily lives. It is a kingdom – well, in Heaven – and it awaits us after we die. Human nature being what it is, we have to be realistic, do what we can to get along as best we can. Religion is a personal matter and has little to do with the practical world we live in, the world of politics, business practices, relationships with people who are different. I may be painting a caricature here, but my point is that by trying to keep the kingdom of heaven spiritual and pure, unsullied by the world, many well-meaning Christians render it irrelevant to our lives in the world.

But this is not the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus revealed. After the teachings in today's gospel, the tone shifts as Jesus' actions and words take on a different coloration. He performs a different kind of miracle from earlier ones, which were usually one-on-one: taking a small amount of bread and fish, He feeds 5000 people and later 4000 for good measure, as if he were manifesting the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. As if he has found the right use for the power to turn stones into bread with which the devil tempted him in the desert.

Shortly after the very public miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus is transfigured in a moment of divine light and darkness accompanied by Moses and Elijah and witnessed by the disciples Peter, James, and John who hardly know

what to do with this new image of their leader. It is as if He has become a different person.

Most significantly, Jesus begins to tell his disciples about his imminent death and resurrection, and then He leads them towards Jerusalem where He survives for less than a week before being arrested, tortured, and killed. And the disciples witness this and participate in it all, and after they think it is all over He appears to them alive.

And through this journey he continues to teach in parables about the Kingdom of Heaven: how a king who forgave a slave his debt is angered when the slave refuses to forgive the debt of his fellow slave; how it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven; how a landowner hired workers in his vineyard at different times of the day and then gave them all the same wages; how a king gave a banquet for his son and when the invited guests refused to come he opened the banquet hall up to everyone, both good and bad; how five wise bridesmaids and five foolish bridesmaids experienced the kingdom of heaven in different ways, as presence and absence. And he tells about a king who could not get his tenants to leave his vineyard and who sent servant after servant only to have them abused and killed and who finally sent his only son whom the tenants summarily murdered. Like Jesus himself. All these

familiar parables are about our response to the kingdom, not a description of the kingdom itself.

But then it suddenly dawns on us – as it must have done for the disciples – that the answer to the question “What is the kingdom of heaven” is revealed not only in the teachings of Jesus but in Jesus himself: his life, death, and resurrection.

In fact, as the story in Matthew unfolds, Jesus emerges as the incarnation of the kingdom of heaven. He is revealed more and more as the human face of the divine, as the human form of the kingdom of heaven in the world. His ministry itself is a parable of the kingdom of heaven confronting the kingdom of the world, not retreating from it but loving it and encountering it and triumphing over it, even transforming it, but only after experiencing its power to kill. The kingdom of heaven is inseparable from the person of Jesus. In our lives as Christians, we cannot separate the message of the kingdom of heaven from the messenger: it is somehow – mysteriously but certainly – through trust in Jesus as Christ that the kingdom of heaven opens itself to us and that God reveals His constant ongoing loving presence within and around us. In this world, here and now.

This is the end of this sermon but perhaps the beginning of another: At the heart of the kingdom of heaven is the loving presence of God. This is the core of the kingdom as Jesus revealed it and as St. Paul experienced it. “For I am convinced,” Paul says in today’s epistle lesson, his letter to the Romans, “ that

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Accepting God’s love: this is what it is to inhabit the kingdom of heaven.  
God’s love that continuously creates us, reveals itself to us, and sustains us.

Thanks be to God. Amen