

8th Sunday after Pentecost July 26, 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.

We pray this in the Lord's Prayer, pretty much every week. But what exactly are we praying for? Have you ever thought about that? What's in your mind when you pray that part of the Lord's Prayer?

Do you picture streets paved in gold floating in the clouds? Do you picture Jesus on a throne and people in white spending their days praising him?

What are we asking to come to the earth that we believe exists in heaven now?

When you ask that question, I think you can begin to understand what most folks mean when they say that they prefer to talk about the reign of heaven, not the kingdom of heaven. With the word kingdom we tend to think about a physical place (the Magical Kingdom of Disney for example). But what we are really praying for is not that the physical kingdom of heaven would come crashing down on earth, but that the reign of God would come down. The way of living and ruling that characterizes God's realm. So, what does that reign look like? Has it come down already? If so, why do we still pray for its coming?

The belief of Christians and certainly of the writer of Matthew is that the reign of heaven was planted, sown, started by Jesus. The reign of heaven is a present reality that has yet to become fully realized. It is often talked about as the "already, but not yet."

This is part of what is being described in at least two of the five “the reign of heaven is like” examples from our reading today. It is like a mustard seed that is sown in a field. But which grows exponentially large and provides for the creation around it. It is something small, unseen, ignored, seemingly insignificant that when it grows will take over the whole field...will provide shelter and food for the rest of creation.

The reign of heaven is like a woman who hides yeast in a whole bunch of flour. You heard that right, the text reads “mixed” the yeast in, but the actual word is the same one used for “hidden” later in the text. It’s the word we get encryption from. Also, as a side note, the amount of flour listed would be about 50-60 pounds or 9 gallons of flour.

Here again, the reign of heaven is like something that is virtually invisible when hidden throughout the immensity of the world, but that changes everything. What happens if you try and do something with that flour and the yeast is in it? The results will be different. That little bit of yeast changes the very nature of the flour and what it will do even though you can’t see the effect yet.

The reign of heaven is already present but not yet fully realized. Is this what these first two illustrations are telling us? That God is already active in small and hidden ways to change the world? Where do you see that happening? Are you even looking for it?

The reign of heaven is like a great treasure that you just stumble across as this tenant farmer does in the field. But, when you do encounter it, it’s something that is worth selling everything to get. The reign of heaven just pops into our

view, do we have the eyes to see it? Do we have the will to invest all that we are in it?

The reign of heaven is something that when we find it, we invest everything in reaction to it. It is something small that can change everything. As my colleagues and I were thinking about this, another analogy crossed our minds. Because we know all about some small, unseen thing that changes the lives of everyone in the whole world, don't we? The coronavirus is microscopically small, but when sown throughout the world it changed everything about how we live, work, breathe! Even when we try and ignore it, the reality of Covid-19 seeps into everything that we do.

Now Covid-19 is life taking not life giving as the reign of God is, but honestly, this is what Jesus was pointing us to as people of faith. That our faith should shape everything about how we live, work, breathe! Even when we aren't strictly "paying attention" to it, it should nevertheless seep into everything that we do.

But why? Why should we give it that influence in our lives? I think the next example of the reign of heaven shows us why. The reign of heaven is like a merchant who is searching for fine pearls who sells all that he has when he finds one, so that he can buy what he has been searching for. All the other examples are about objects- a net, a seed, yeast, a hidden treasure. This one is like a merchant searching for valuable pearls. What if God is the merchant? What if the pearls are us? What if what is given to obtain that pearl is Jesus? The reign of heaven is God's willingness both to see us each as pearls of great value, to dedicate God's life to searching for us, but also to pay anything... including God's own Son, so that we might be God's. How can we not respond to that with the

same kind of life shaping response we give a deadly virus? The work we do to avoid death ought not be more than the work we do in response to life! How can we not love the God who pays that price for us- who gives us life fuller and more abundant- how can we not love that God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

And then, we come back to the question of what that reign of heaven looks like. Well, it is like a net that takes in everyone and everything it comes in contact with. It will get sorted out later, but right now, here on earth, before Jesus comes again- all can be part of it. Wheat and Weed. Sinner and Saint. Together in our imperfect unity that is the church.

What does the reign of heaven look like? Jesus showed us in the Sermon on the Mount: The reign of heaven is a place where we do not murder, even in our thoughts and our anger. It is a place where we do not turn people into objects for our own pleasure or use. It is a place where we share freely out of our bounty with those who are in need. It is a place where we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It is a place where we are attentive to our own failings far more than we point out those of others. O God, may your reign come and that right soon!

As Jesus in Matthew 25 reminds us, the reign of heaven is a place where the thirsty are given drink, the hungry food, the homeless shelter, the naked clothes just because they are so and not because we think they have earned it or deserve it. Why? Because God has provided those things for us and we sure don't deserve it. We haven't earned it. They are gifts given to us by a loving God to share with others. The reign of heaven is a place where the imprisoned are not

isolated but kept part of the community even as they suffer the consequences for their actions. It is a place where Jesus is assumed to be present in those in need and those who help us when we are in need.

This is the reign we pray each week would come down- knowing that it will come whether we pray for it or not but praying that it might come for us. That we might truly live life differently because of this little seed of faith that has been sown in our lives.

That we would have eyes to see the small glimpses of the reign of heaven we encounter as we live. Part of that comes from knowing what to look for, of being mindful of it. I remember growing up and my best friend – Ry Mittlestadt- he lived across the street and he and his family were trying to figure out if they were being called to move back to Colorado. Well, Ry started telling me all these signs that seemed to point to that. They would see Colorado license plates, friends from Colorado called, they heard advertisements for Colorado, etc. Well, I won't discount that God was calling them there, but I wondered if part of the reason they saw those things was because they were looking for them. That they were paying attention in a way they hadn't before.

Let us look for those hidden places where the reign of God shows up! Let us expect to find them! Those small moments where God's grace and mercy are made manifest. I'm sure we can all name something like that in our lives.

And let us not discount the idea that the reign of God can also be manifested in us and through us. I saw a movie on Netflix- *the Old Guard*. It's not exactly a movie about the love of Jesus, but part of what it focused on was someone who had given up helping the world because she couldn't see where it had done any good.

And yet, someone had gone to the trouble to trace how this woman's acts to save others had actually saved thousands. This life she saved meant this treatment for cancer was discovered. That act she stopped meant this person could bring peace to a conflict.

We are like that that woman too often. Discrediting the value of what we do in God's name. Unable to see or acknowledge the truth of how our little everyday acts that reflect the reign of heaven can transform the world. At least for one person. How they can leaven even this messy mound of flour. And in those acts that we do, through God's work, we change the very nature of the world.

May we be inspired to live our lives transformed and shaped by our faith even as Covid has done so for us. May we have eyes to see the hidden places and the small glimpses of God's reign in the world around us and to name those for others. May we be given the gift of knowing just a fraction of the ways in which we have provided life for others.

May the reign of heaven come... and that right quick ...for all of us.