

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 30 2023

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Instead of one parable this week, we have a whole slew of them. Seeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, nets. If the parables are meant to give us the right questions or frame of reference for things, what do we learn about the reign of heaven from these short parables?

We learn it is like a mustard seed, which starts small but grows big. Really big! Now, the mustard seed has a hint of something unclean, or unusual, especially in this context. Israel, after all, is compared to a cedar of Lebanon, not a condiment bush.

Perhaps this is a call for faith in God who is doing mighty things through a small movement. A promise that God is at work, even if we can't see it. A parable of hope, perhaps? Mighty growth from small beginnings. Perhaps it is that the reign of heaven is not the grand mansion- but the English ivy that has overgrown it. It is not the flashy show of wealth and power, but the slow but sure overcoming. It takes time, but it persists.

Then we learn the reign of heaven is like a pinch of yeast hidden in almost two 5-gallon buckets full of flour. But it is enough to leaven the whole lot. So, the reign of heaven is like yeast, a catalyst for growth. It is hidden in the world and gets everywhere. But a little bit will change a whole lot of things around it.

Here, too, yeast has some hint of being unclean in the Jewish mind. After all, the sign of the Jews is unleavened bread.

What happens when you go to bake bread from this flour with yeast hidden in it, it rises. You get something unexpected.

What does this look like in the real world? As one commentator put it “The kingdom works by contagion in day-by-day friendship.” The reign of heaven affects those around us just by coming into contact with it. One pithy, but true, saying is that faith is caught more than taught. What transforms people is the consistent contact they have with people who are already citizens of the reign of heaven. That whether it is parents with their children, or us with our friends, the reign of heaven will have an effect on them because it is embedded in our lives in concrete ways. They, too, will be infected with the love of Jesus.

Then we hear that the reign of heaven is like a great, hidden treasure you stumble across and sell everything to possess. The reign of heaven is worth buying into, without reservation. It is not something that you go, “Meh” over. English author and follower of Jesus C.S. Lewis once said that, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” The parable challenges us to embrace whole-hearted commitment to this cause... this way of living. Where we love our neighbors with the same wild abandon God in Jesus has loved us. Where we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, house the homeless not because they have earned it or deserve it, but because they need it. Where we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

The question this raises is, are you all in? With this whole reign of heaven following Jesus thing? Are you all in? The reign of heaven is like the title character from Good Will Hunting leaving his beloved Boston, friends- job-life, to

follow his love to California. The kingdom of heaven is like that. It is of infinite importance.

This parable also, in combination with the previous, suggests that God is already active in the world, we just need to discover it. We practice this at our offering time. Unearthing the places God's reign has been buried in the world. And when we do unearth it, when we spot it loose in the world, we put all our eggs in that basket. But the twist here is that it is done with a response of joy, not sacrifice to get the goal. To live this all in life is not a sacrifice, but a great joy and even relief. Ah! Here it is.

I remember one word of advice my dad gave me when I started playing football, don't go halfhearted. Play full out. If you go half-assed that's when you get hurt. Are we all in on this reign of heaven following Jesus thing? Do we even think of it in terms of something to be treasured in that way?

And... the reign of heaven is like a merchant searching for something. So, it is the unexpected thing that breaks into your life and changes it. And, it is the thing that you keep looking for and when you do find it- you are all in! It is valuable above all other things- even when people think you are crazy for paying that cost.

Finally, the reign of heaven is like net fishing. This is one that would be anchored on the shore, sent straight out, and then swept back in. What does it grab?

Everything! The kingdom gathers everyone. Back to a couple of weeks ago- we are to spread the seed of the word... everywhere and always! To paraphrase a popular t-shirt saying from my youth, "Evangel them all, Let God sort them out!" because like last week, who actually sorts out the weeds and the wheat? The

angels, God. Not us. So, the reign of heaven is not discriminatory. It takes in everyone and everything.

The reign of heaven, that we live in, that we work to bring others into, is like this. It is the little stuff that- when it is the reign of heaven- grows big. Ministries like Matthew 25 in Cedar Rapids. The Christian church itself. But also, the faith of people like Nadia Bolz-Weber, CS Lewis, and countless anonymous others who have had that reign of heaven brush up against them... embodied in you on the playground, during VBS, at the office, in the checkout line.

It is like a bit of yeast thrown into a huge mound of flour that still manages to change it. You might not notice it now, but you sure will find out later. It is the way those seeds of faith get planted. It is the faith glitter that comes off us as we live out our lives in the reign of heaven and let me tell you that stuff gets everywhere!

It is a treasure we both pursue and bump into unexpectedly, but whenever and wherever we encounter it, we are all in. It is of infinite importance in our lives. Note, it is not the only thing of importance in our lives, but it and everything about it trumps all else. Family, political party, country, race, ethnicity.

The reign of heaven is not about drawing boundaries to keep people out, but about casting nets and pulling in as many as we can. Living in the messy welcome of it all. Trusting that God will sort out the rest later.

The reign of heaven is a week of VBS where we learn that God loves us no matter what. That God is with us everywhere. That God is stronger than anything... even death. And that God is surprising. Showing up in the smallest seed, the least

likely places. Showing strength and power through love and submission. Loving enemies and praying for those who persecute God.

Seeds, yeast, treasure, pearls, nets. The reign of heaven is like all of those things, and like none of them. It is like God in Jesus, loving you in all your messiness with perfect love and wild abandon. It is like a group of folks in central Iowa gathering each week to sing, speak, listen, receive the life-giving word that has claimed and called us.

The reign of heaven is hidden to be found, searched for, surprising, persistent, powerful. And, thanks to the love of God in Jesus Christ it is ours. A gift, not to be hoarded, but to be shared.

So let's do that.