

July 30, 2023
Lectionary 17, Year A
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Worship in the Park with Remnant Community Church
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

I used to teach a Confirmation class lesson about movies. In it I would show kids clips of popular movies, at least movies that were popular back then, and I would ask them if they saw any spiritual message in those clips. Then I would talk to them about the spiritual or theological connections that I saw in the movies.

The movies I showed them were movies like Toy Story and Polar Express and The Matrix and The Truman Show. None of the movies that I showed them clips of were created with the intention of conveying Christian spiritual content. And yet, if you watched them with the right frame of mind, with the right kind of eyes, it was there, hidden in plain sight. Messages of grace and community and baptismal new life and forgiveness and reconciliation and belief and willful disbelief and the blind receiving sight.

I used to tell the kids that I was trying to make it so that they would not be able to watch a movie without finding Jesus talking to them through it, reminding them of faith and the church.

I haven't used that curriculum in my Confirmation class since I've come to Emmanuel, but I was reminded of it when I read today's gospel reading.

Because I think that Jesus was trying to do much the same thing, though not with movies, but with ordinary life, in the parables that he tells today.

Think about who's included in these parables. People from so many walks of life. The parable of the mustard seed, a parable for farmers, for those who labored in the fields sowing seeds and watching them grow. The parable of the yeast, a

parable about women, baking bread, working in the home, feeding their families. The parable of the treasure in the field, a parable for the adventurer or for the common laborer, who suddenly comes upon something precious and lifechanging. The parable of the pearl, a parable for merchants and traders, for those in business and engaged in the commerce of the day. The parable of the net and the large catch of fish, a parable for fishermen, who knew what it was like to cast their nets into the sea, and who longed for the big catch, the catch that enabled them to be picky about what they kept and what they threw away. The parable of the scribe, being like a householder, finding treasure in the old and the new, in the wisdom that had come from their ancestors and in the wisdom that came from Jesus, who spoke to them in parables.

Jesus spoke to ordinary people about themselves, about their own lives, about planting and baking and fishing and buying and selling and searching and finding. And he told them that the kingdom of heaven was like that.

He told them to look for everyday miracles and in those everyday miracles:

- in bushes that grow up from the of smallest seeds and give shelter to the birds nesting in the trees.
- in bread that rises, when a little bit of yeast is mixed in with a large amount of flour
- in unexpected treasure found in a field
- in a pearl of great value, the culmination of a lifelong search
- in nets filled with fish
- in treasures, old and new,

they would see God at work. The kingdom of heaven, not far away, not unattainable, not the special domain of the educated, the privileged, the wealthy, but with them. Just as Jesus was. Emmanuel. God with them.

God in their homes, God in the fields, God in their workplaces, God with them on the sea, God with them in Jesus' words, God with them in their day-to-day activities, in the lost and in the found, in the ordinary and the extraordinary, in the blessing of simple and miraculous life.

You might have noticed, that there are some verses from chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel that are missing from today's gospel reading. The verses that we have assigned as our reading for today are verses 31-33 and then verses 44-52. So, there are 11 verses that are missing.

I need to remind you that I don't actually choose what scripture readings are going to be read on a Sunday morning or what readings I'm going to preach on. We get our scripture readings for Sunday morning from the Revised Common Lectionary, which is a blessing and a limitation.

It's a blessing, because there is one part of worship planning that is already done for us. The Revised Common Lectionary provides a pattern and a flow to our worship that brings comfort and familiarity, as well as a certain depth to our worship services.

It's a blessing because it also prevents the people in my congregation from hearing my fifty-two favorite scripture passages over and over again, year in and year out.

The main limitation of the Revised Common Lectionary that I and all lectionary users face, is that we are, to a certain extent, constrained by the assigned readings for each Sunday. I can't go "off script" or "off lectionary" based on the needs of the world or my congregation on a particular Sunday without it being kind of a big deal. I've only done it twice in twenty years of preaching.

The Revised Common Lectionary is why we're missing 11 verses of today's gospel reading. I didn't make a choice to skip them. The lectionary preparers, who did their work back in 1992, I guess decided that we didn't need them, at least not this week, not for this Sunday.

I suspect that they skipped those 11 verses in today's gospel reading because they just wanted today's gospel reading to be a listing of Jesus' parables, rather than the discussion of the parables that are found in the missing verses.

But, of course, I had to go and read the verses that were missing and found in them Jesus' explanation for why he spoke in parables and in it he says that he spoke in parables to confuse people. Really?

His explanation said that it had not been given to everyone to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. He said that it had been prophesied that people would hear, but not listen, and without listening they would not understand and that people would look, but not perceive.

In other words, the expectation was that some, perhaps many in the crowds who gathered to hear Jesus, would not know what he was talking about. They would hear him talk about seeds and yeast and treasure and fish and say, "What's this guy babbling about? There's nothing holy about my wife baking bread. There's nothing heavenly about the backbreaking work of fishing. There's nothing miraculous about a seed growing when you plant it. What's so special about that? That's what's supposed to happen. I expected something more from this guy that everybody's been talking about. Where are the miracles? Where are the mysteries? That can't be what heaven's like." And then they would walk away.

But I suspect that some people, who heard Jesus speak, got it. Some of them heard it and understood. Some of them listened and looked and saw. Some of them heard behind Jesus' words in the parables the plea that they would open their eyes, "Open your eyes, please, open your eyes."

And they saw the world anew. They saw their work anew. They saw themselves anew. They saw themselves included in the parables and they saw the holiness of the world around them.

They saw the miracle of the beloved creation, that God had called “tov maod” which is Hebrew for “Very good”, and they knew that God was there, God was with them. Not far away, not distanced, but present.

Sometimes we sing a hymn called *Gather Us In* and that hymn includes these words:

*Not in the dark of buildings confining,
not in some heaven, light years away,
but here in this place the new light is shining.
Now is the kingdom. Now is the day.*

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship #532 *Gather Us In*, Marty Haugen)

And I think that those words were inspired by the parables that Jesus told. Parables to tell people that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, that God was with them in their work and in rest, in their joys and in their labors, in their homes and in their companions.

Through parables, Jesus told his first hearers to see the holiness in the world around them. Some of them heard and wondered and walked away, grumbling. “What was he talking about, the kingdom of heaven is here? Here (!?) in this broken and messed up world?”

But some of them heard and their lives were transformed, as they looked at their lives differently and felt God’s nearness, and realized that their sense of the separation between the holy and the profane was an illusion and they recognized the kingdom of heaven at hand, and they became new people, spiritual people, not because they turned their backs on their lives, on their work, on their homes, families, fields, but because their eyes were opened and they saw them in new ways.

And here we are, two congregations, hearing Jesus’ parables, outdoors, in a park, closer to the things of the earth than we normally are when we are worshiping, closer to each other than we normally are when we are worshiping

and to us, too, Jesus is saying, Jesus is pleading, “Open your ears and hear. open your eyes and see. Listen and understand.

The kingdom of heaven is like...”

The kingdom of heaven is like this. Amen.

Alternate Ending—Preached at Zoom Worship:

And there you are in your homes, and here I am in my office, worshiping together through the medium of a screen or a phone and yet, still, hearing Jesus’ parables together and to us too, Jesus is saying, “Open your ears and hear. Open your eyes and see. Listen and understand. The kingdom of heaven is found in your homes, in your workplaces, in quiet places, and in places of noisy fellowship, in growing things, in the view out your windows, in the fellowship that we share even across miles. Look, listen, understand.”

The kingdom of heaven is like this. Amen.