

Year A, Proper 12, Pentecost 8

July 30th, 2017

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Things Hidden Since the Beginning of the World

In the portion of Matthew 13 the lectionary left off, Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2 where the psalmist says *“I’ll speak in parables. I’ll declare what has been hidden since the beginning of the world.”* Matthew thinks Jesus reveals mysteries hidden since civilization began and Jesus’ parables reveal these mysteries. Jesus uses parables because the ruts of human thought are so deep humans must be jolted out of them to have any chance of seeing the truth. This morning we will focus on five parables from Matthew 13 with the fifth being the most difficult and revelatory for our time in history.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It’s the smallest of all seeds. But when it’s grown, it’s the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest it its branches.”

No Middle Eastern or mid-western farmer, for that matter, would plant mustard seed in their field. Mustard is a weed that grows fast and tall and soon saps the moisture and shades the wheat. Secondly, mustard seeds are not the smallest of seeds; there are many seeds smaller. And finally they don’t grow as large as trees though they may get big enough to provide nesting for small birds.

Jesus is using exaggeration and every person in his audience would know it. Could the exaggeration be the key to the parable, the device that gets human thinking out of our rut?

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard plant planted in human culture that casts a shadow on the way we organize and run the world? As we know, the kingdom of heaven centers on love with God being the loving creator. It’s a kingdom that has no need for rivalry, jealousy or violence. In fact, the kingdoms existence calls into question human culture’s way of depending on these evils. That’s why human culture always sees the kingdom of heaven as a weed that should be pulled.

Because the mustard seed is so small in the beginning, who would have thought it would grow into such a problem for those who rule the world. And yet this tiny seed, this kingdom of God set loose in the world, has become something much bigger. In fact, it’s so big it provides shelter for the weak and vulnerable of this earth. Human culture can’t have the kingdom of heaven in its midst and act with impunity. But it’s too late. It’s there now. God planted the mustard seed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

“He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through the dough.’” In this parable God is a woman who hides yeast in a bushel of wheat dough. The tiny yeast cells slowly work their way through the dough, changing it as they go, until the whole bushel has been transformed. This yeasting process has become one of the most important metaphors for how gospel impacts culture.

The cross and resurrection of Jesus is the yeast that impacts the human species by revealing the mechanism hidden since the beginning of civilization. This mechanism is the pointing of the finger, the judging between good and evil. Jesus, God’s totally innocent Son, allowed us to point the finger at him and destroy him. When we did that we reveal what we do and what forms the heart of our civilization. This awareness of how we make victims and use them to build community has gradually worked its way through all human culture like yeast through dough. Now we can point our finger but fewer and fewer believe the one we point toward is guilty. In fact the cross and resurrection of Jesus has shown us that the pointing of the finger is the human problem. This awareness did not come instantly when Jesus showed himself to his disciples after his resurrection. Instead, the meaning of his death and resurrection dawned on us gradually through the span of two thousand years and continues to spread throughout the world in secular and non-religious ways.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.”

We search for this treasure, always thinking it comes from within us or from the world hidden in some experience we have not yet had for the kingdom of heaven is not obvious; it is hidden and must be uncovered. And then by some grace we uncover it! We recognize it as what we have been looking for and so we bury it again until we can buy the field and make it our own. How many have had a vision of the kingdom, experienced in a piece of music, an experience, or an intuition and then spent years jettisoning from their lives what gets in the way of possessing it so that they can claim it as their own.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.” We are all merchants and life is about searching for pearls. When by some grace we find the pearl of great price, the kingdom of heaven, life beyond rivalry that comes from God, we realize our search is over. We have found what we have been looking for and we sell all that we own to buy the precious pearl.

Now we have come to the fifth and most difficult parable. *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, they pulled*

it to the shore, where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers. But the bad fish they threw away. That's the way it will be at the end of the present age. The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people, and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth."

This parable has two parts and the whole thing together is the parable. The first part gives us valuable information on how it will be at the end of this present age. The present age is the age that ends when Jesus returns. At the end of this present age everyone knows the pointing of the finger is an empty gesture; and because we know it, it no longer works. But now we have no effective way of siphoning off our violence so everyone is like all kinds of fish caught in the same net. Not only are we fish caught in the same net, we are the people on the shore dividing the fish into categories. Everyone is pointing the finger and sorting fish into categories of good and evil. In such a world there is no grace, mercy or forgiveness and everyone is polarized. All see themselves as good and their rival as evil and civilization is in crisis. That's how it will be at the end of the age. In short, it looks a lot like our own world on this day in July, 2017.

This is where the second part of the parable kicks in. Here the angels, stand-ins for what we do to each other, throw the evil ones who separate into good and bad into the fiery furnace while the good who refrain from separating are saved.

So what does this whole parable say about the kingdom of heaven? In the kingdom of heaven there is no separation of good from evil and no condemnation. Those participating in the kingdom of heaven know God loves us all. The parable has twisted on us and we discover it to mean the exact opposite of what we had thought it meant.

"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. They said to him, 'Yes.'" Do you think they did?

Then Jesus goes on and says if they do understand they will be trained leaders in the kingdom of heaven who bring truth, both old and new, out of their treasure chest to share with the whole community. What will they be sharing? They will be sharing "Things hidden since the beginning of the world!" Amen.