



“The Kingdom of God is Like...”

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, July 24, 2011

I would guess most of you know the answer to this question. What was Jesus’ favorite method of teaching? Lecture? Group discussion? Assigned readings? Parables? Jesus loved to tell parables. In fact, the gospels attribute about fifty parables to Jesus.

On many Sundays we read a single parable of Jesus, consider what it meant to his first century audience and then wrestle with its meanings for us today. Our hope is that if we engage our minds and open ourselves to God’s Spirit, we may glimpse a new insight or be reminded of an important bit of wisdom.

Some of Jesus’ parables are like an onion, where we peel back layer after layer. They are so provocative that we discover multiple meanings to ponder. Other parables are like the love we have for our spouse or partner that takes on new dimensions over the years. These parables are so rich that new meanings emerge as our spiritual life matures. And some of Jesus’ parables are like your daughter confiding in you that she is gay; shattering your stereotypes. These parables shock us into questioning our convictions and prod us to see the world in a new light.

Some parables of Jesus, like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, are lengthy and elaborate. Today, we hear of an occasion when Jesus fired off five pithy parables, giving his audience, then and now, plenty to contemplate.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven, more than any other single subject. Yet, it is an elusive concept, because Jesus addressed it in so different ways.

I can imagine the disciples having a private meeting with Jesus in which they attempt to nail down the precise meaning of the divine domain. Peter asks, “Jesus, is God’s kingdom already present or is it something coming in the future?” To which Jesus responds, “Yes.” Frustrated, he sits down and lets Andrew take a crack at it. “Jesus, is the kingdom here on earth or is it in God’s heavenly realm?” To which Jesus responds, “Precisely!” Visibly annoyed, James tries to gain some clarity. “Jesus, is the kingdom in plain sight, or is it hidden?” And, Jesus says, “Absolutely!”

The kingdom of God is a slippery term that’s hard to get a bead on. Jesus never provides a concise, unambiguous definition of what he means. Sometimes he gives what sounds like contradictory descriptions. Overall, the Scriptures leave us with the impression that the kingdom

is so magnificent that it is more than we can grasp. Jesus constantly draws pictures of it by comparing the kingdom to ordinary things we understand. That's what we find in today's passage. He delivers five, rapid fire metaphors that impart an impression of God's kingdom.

He says the kingdom is like a mustard seed, the kingdom is like yeast, the kingdom is like a buried treasure, the kingdom is like a valuable pearl, the kingdom is like a fishing net.

Taking them one at a time, how exactly is the kingdom like a mustard seed? The mustard seed appears to the eye as tiny and unimpressive. But do not underestimate it. This seed, the size of the head of a pin, can grow into a large plant thousands of times its size.

To help us grasp what Jesus is saying, we need to remember that the early followers of Jesus were subjected to Roman occupation. The Roman Empire was an earthly kingdom that was brutal and suffocating.

In ancient times, the Old Testament prophets had envisioned a day when God's kingdom would be present on earth. They envisioned a day when swords would be beaten into plowshares, the oppressed would be set free and justice would reign.

Jesus expanded on their notion of the kingdom as a place where the hungry would be fed, the ill would be healed, the weak would be cared for and the repentant would be forgiven. And Jesus went further. He said that God's kingdom was drawing near. His ministry initiated the revolution that opposed all human kingdoms and set the stage for the full realization of God's reign.

The people he addressed were experiencing the harsh rule of Rome each day of their lives. Their freedom was severely restricted, their society was structured to keep them in poverty and they lived in constant fear. Jesus said an alternative kingdom, God's kingdom, was taking root. At the present time it was no more impressive than a miniscule mustard seed, but over time it would grow into something immense.

How is the kingdom like yeast that leavens bread? Yeast is a small unimpressive looking substance, but when mixed with flour, it will make the flour rise. Yeast does not work instantly; it is a time-consuming process. For a long time it goes unnoticed. It's hidden in the flour.

In a similar way, God's kingdom is hidden from the eyes of the Roman rulers. They do not recognize it. Yet, as the yeast transforms the flour and creates bread, the coming of God's kingdom transforms the world.

Like the parable of the mustard seed, this parable gave hope to the followers of Jesus. Although nothing seemed to be happening and their efforts seemed to be achieving nothing, their work was having a gradual impact, slowly changing the world as more and more people adopted a new creed by which to live: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

How is the kingdom like a treasure hidden in a field, where upon discovery, a man sold everything he had in order to buy the field? Or like a merchant who discovered a valuable pearl and liquidated his assets in order to own it?

Jesus is saying that once you grasp the value of God's kingdom, you will go to extreme measures to obtain it. Nothing compares to God's kingdom, but it requires a wholehearted commitment, such that we will risk everything in order to be a part of it.

Finally, Jesus says that the kingdom is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. With this final parable, Jesus contrasts the Roman Empire with God's Empire. The Roman Empire relied on propaganda, oppression, cruelty, greed, violence and fear. God's Empire relies on truth, justice, compassion, generosity, peace and hope. One kingdom will bring you death; the other will bring you life. What will you risk in order to acquire it?

Jesus seems to have told these five brief parables, not to describe simply the *essence* of God's kingdom, but to encourage our *participation* in it. He does not want us to be swept up by the kingdoms of this world and miss the one kingdom that is life-giving and everlasting. To that end, these parables are packaged together to confront us with a decision.

This time of year, thoughts often turn to baseball, and when I think of baseball, Yogi Berra comes to mind - not because of his skill as a catcher or his prowess with a bat, but because of his unforgettable quotes. Perhaps his most repeated quote was his quip: "It's like déjà-vu, all over again." But with the temperatures we have been having the last few days, we should not forget his astute observation about sultry weather. He said, "It ain't the heat, it's the humility."

Another of Berra's memorable contributions was: "Half the lies they tell about me aren't true." However, as a theologian, I'm drawn to one of his more philosophical insights. He said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Often times we face a decision and we must choose whether we will take one path or another. Jesus wants to know which kingdom we will pursue. The one that leads to emptiness and despair or the one that leads to wholeness and hope.

I have never been to a greyhound race, but I know these sleek dogs are extremely fast and they chase a mechanical rabbit around the track. You probably know that when greyhounds reach the point that they begin to slow down and can't run as fast as the younger ones, the owners have no use for them. Typically, they run an ad offering them as a pet, but if no one comes forward, they kill the dog.

Fred Craddock tells of visiting his niece in Arizona who adopted a greyhound after his racing days were over. This dog was wonderful with children.

One day when Craddock was sitting in his niece's den, the dog was lying on the floor and his niece's toddler "was pulling on its tail. The other child, a little older, had his head on the dog's stomach, using it for a pillow. The dog could not have looked happier."

Craddock said to the dog, "Are you still racing?"

The dog said, "No, I don't race anymore."

Craddock asked, "Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?"

He said, "No, I don't miss it."

"Well, then what's the matter? Did you get too old?"

"No, I still had some race in me."

"Well, did you not win?"

"I won over a million dollars for my owner."

Craddock kept pursuing the matter. He asked, "Then what was it, bad treatment?"

"Oh, no, they treated us like royalty."

"Well, then, what happened?"

And the dog said, "I quit."

"You quit?"

"That's right. I quit."

Why did you quit?"

And he said, "I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. All that running, running, running and what I was chasing was not even real."¹

NOTES

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p.106.