
Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

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Sermon for Sunday, July 27, 2008

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Proper 12A

The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta

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Just prior to the Fourth of July weekend we flew to New York City for a little theatre, art and good food. I've been to New York many times, and for nearly two years worked for the Diocese of New York doing youth and young adult ministry in the three counties north of the city. Like Chicago, where I spent seven years of my ministry, New York is not only a city that never sleeps, but a stimulating and energetic hub of culture, finance and great streets to walk on. For the first time, however, we took the Circle Line tour of Manhattan. It was the two hour, not the three-hour cruise, which covered the lower part of the island, including the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. I saw New York City, with a whole new perspective, as the well-informed guide pointed out the sights—the wharf of the Star Lines where the Titanic was supposed to dock—the place where the Twin Towers used to stand, the end of the island where the first Dutch settlers landed—around to the lower east side, Chinatown up to the United Nations. When we docked I felt like I had experienced New York City in a totally new and revealing way. What a difference perspective I now have of this great city.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches in parables, offering his disciples a new way of looking at God—a God whom they thought they knew. He teaches this way because his preaching in Galilee was meeting with hostility and rejection. So Jesus decided to teach and preach in a way that would not get him in trouble, but would be understandable to his followers

If you have ever tried to explain to someone else what you believe about God, you will understand why it's so hard. There are no words that are true enough or big enough to explain who God is. Whenever I teach an adult confirmation class, and invite persons to talk about their religious journey, most folks talk about their institutional history—what denomination they grew up in, when they were baptized, about the pastors they knew. Very few people ever talk about God, or about a God-experience in their lives. Maybe we all just feel inadequate in talking about something which is omnipotent and incomprehensible, yet which we believe is imminent and present.

Theologians and preachers have spent countless hours and volumes trying to describe the nature of God because that is our human way, because we must try. We don't always do it very well, but we get close to the truth when we describe holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trusting one another to make the connections. Believing in God is like falling in love or like being welcomed home after a big fight or like that perfect dive at the Olympic Games. We cannot really say what it is, exactly, but we can say what it is like.

If you remember your high school English class, you remember section on figures of speech, where this way of talking in metaphors—talking about one thing by referring to another thing, getting at the meaning of one thing by comparing it to another. I remember it because my mother was my one of my English teachers!

This is the way that Jesus often taught, especially in Matthew's Gospel. He was always making comparisons. Sinners are like

lost sheep, the word of God like a seed sown on different kinds of ground, the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast. "The Kingdom of heaven is like this," he said over and over again, telling his hearers stories about brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and weeds. Jesus seems to be saying, join me in the boat and take a look at these common things from a different perspective, and you will see them differently.

In today's verse in Matthew 13, Jesus throws out several comparisons. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like buried treasure, like a fine pearl, like a net cast into the sea. The images come quickly, with no preparation and no explanation. There is no time to settle in, to ruminate on these teachings, or ponder their implications. Jesus fires out these parables, like a digital camera at a birthday party. The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this.

When we pause and take a deep breath, and try to understand what Jesus was saying, the first two comparisons are pretty easy. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or a handful of yeast—nothing very impressive, at first. But give either of them something to work on—sow the seed and mix the yeast with flour, an amazing growth occurs; a tree big enough for birds to nest in, and bread enough to feed everyone gathered. If the kingdom is like this then it is surprising and full of potential.

The next pair of comparisons is a bit more complicated. First, the kingdom is like a man who finds buried treasure in a field, covers it back up, and sells all that he owns to buy the field. And second, the kingdom is like a merchant who searches for and finds a pearl of great price, selling all that he owns to buy it. Each man finds something of great value and sells all that he has to make it his own. There is some discerning to do and decisions to be made for those who are willing and eager to pay the price.

The final comparison—of the kingdom of heaven and a fishing net—takes a different angle. Thrown into the sea, the net gathers fish of every kind, good and bad, which are sorted out once the net is full. If the kingdom of heaven is like this then, in the end, it is not something we find, but something that finds us and brings us to shore.

As Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her sermon on this text, the one thing that is strikingly similar to all of these images is their essential hiddenness—the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast hidden in the dough, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl hidden among other pearls, the net hidden in the depths of the sea. If the kingdom is like these, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye but something worth searching for, something just beneath the surface waiting to be discovered.

These images resonant with me because as a child, and later as an adult, I joined my parents in Saturday country auctions in search of that perfect piece of furniture or perhaps a piece of Ohio pottery with a mark that no one else but me would recognize. My folks spent countless hours repairing and restoring cherry tables and oak chairs, removing layers of paint and dirt and giving them new life and use. I still have a round oak table that at one time lived in my great-aunt's chicken house on the family farm, which my father carefully restored. Or one auction when I was in high school I bought what I thought was a box of old books. Later, when I searched through the box I also found multiple sheets of old stamps from the 1940's and 50's and since I also collected stamps I rejoiced in this unexpected find.

It is the stuff that adventure movies are made of—the sunken treasure, the secret knowledge, the long-lost document gathering just in the trunk in the attic—suddenly discovered, found and enjoyed amid much celebration. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says.

Religious pilgrims have been on this search since the beginning, seeking the holy in places where the holy should be found. I felt that way a bit myself when I was at Chartre Cathedral two years ago and walked the path of that first Labyrinth, or when I was able to study in Canterbury for two weeks, singing Evensong every day and spending hours wandering around that beautiful Cathedral where the Lambeth Conference is now taking place. Maybe we should begin in Jerusalem or Rome or Canterbury. But then again it may not matter where we are, as long as we keep our eyes open for extraordinary clues wherever we are. If the kingdom of heaven is hidden in this world, only the most dedicated and persistent detectives among us stand a chance of finding it at all.

Unless of course, it is really in plain view. Perhaps God has decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any exotic places, but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives: like a

sterling spoon found among the stainless; the diamond beneath the rhinestones; the first edition beneath the readers digest condensed; the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed up in the daily and routine stuff of our lives""the wheat and the weeds all mixed up together in the same field; all of them signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the mundane and routine bits of our lives.

During these past years that I've served the Church, there have certainly been wonderful mountain-top experiences when God's presence has been almost overwhelming, and when it felt like the kingdom was oh so near. But most of the time, I have experienced the presence of God in very ordinary circumstances""over a wonderful lunch with the chairs of the altar guild, or in a reassuring conversation with someone going into the hospital or even a hug from a couple I married years ago.

I don't think our spiritual journeys need to take us to new and exotic places. Perhaps all we need to do is get into a boat and see the place we've known from a new perspective. Then, it's like being there for the first time. The Kingdom of heaven is like, you fill in the blank.

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