

Sunday, July 30, 2017 – Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Psalm 128 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Sermon title: “The kingdom of heaven is like ... what?”

For this coming Sunday, we will leave Paul’s Letter to the Romans and get back to the gospels, specifically to Matthew’s gospel and a series of shorter parables about Jesus’ favorite teaching topic – namely, the kingdom of heaven.

1. My friend Scott Hoezee, who teaches preaching at a U.S. seminary, tells his students to keep their sermons to one theme. Much better for clarity, he says. But then, here is Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, breaking that rule in a big way. As Scott puts it, “Jesus is on something of a simile binge. The kingdom is . . . a mustard seed . . . a bit of yeast in dough . . . a hidden treasure . . . a pearl of great value . . . a net catching fish. Jesus here slides easily from the agricultural to the culinary to the marketplace and to the fishing trade.” I think there is little doubt, even among unbelievers, that Jesus was a great teacher, so what’s going on here? How could any listener (or 21st century reader) make sense of this? Isn’t there too much going on? What does Jesus want the listener (and reader) to understand?
2. So, perhaps there is one theme here after all, and that theme is “the hiddenness of the kingdom.” All of the parables point to that one truth – namely, that the kingdom is not easy to find. We have to work for it, we sometimes stumble upon it, we may even doubt at first that we are seeing anything at all (mustard seeds). Getting at the meaning here may not be as easy as we think. We often think that salvation is mostly about “getting into heaven,” a reward for a life of good, moral behavior. But Jesus wants us to understand something different in these verses. Isn’t the central teaching here that the kingdom is something “at hand”? It’s something we need to look for. Before going further, you may want to discuss the kingdom as Jesus presents it. As I mentioned, it is Jesus’ most frequent theme (without a close second) in his teaching. What does he mean by it? Is it something you look for? (Is it something you have sold everything in order to buy?)
3. Read one theologian’s attempt to explain this reality: “This divine reality, Jesus explains, is something that we all walk right by. We walk around it. We walk upon it. We step on and over this Love all the time without ever seeing it. Even so, Jesus says, this divine reality is still there, still the treasure of a lifetime buried in the heart of human existence. The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is just waiting for someone, anyone, to stop, to take the time to start digging, to take the risk and to have the courage to look more deeply beneath the surface. When we do, Jesus says, there are riches beyond measure to be discovered.”
4. So, here’s the thing: The kingdom of God (or of heaven, since they’re the same thing) is not what we expect. Our idea of a kingdom is powerful, flashy, showy, like the political kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God, by contrast, is small, even tiny. It looks foolish. In fact, this kingdom can even get buried in the soil and disappear. Or like yeast, once it is mixed into the flour, water, and oil, there isn’t anything to see. Yet, yeast has a great effect. So also with the kingdom of God – not what you expect in terms of political clout, but powerful nonetheless. Does this begin to explain why we spend our lives chasing after other things and why we tend to miss what is closer to us and far more valuable?

5. There's a problem with one or two of these parables. I think William Willimon, a retired Methodist bishop, puts it well: The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is like a man who, while plowing a field, hears his plow hit something, so he bends down, scoops away the dirt, and there finds buried treasure. He quickly covers up the treasure, leaves his plowing, runs to the bankers, sells everything he's got, and then goes back to the owner of the field and asks, "Ummm, how much would you like for that rocky, worthless, barren field out there? Call me crazy, but I'd like to buy it." Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to people like that. Now some of you, because you are so very good, are concerned about the business ethics behind this wheeling and dealing ... Isn't the man who runs out and buys this field under some ethical obligation to full disclosure, simple honesty? Well, such petty, bourgeoisie moral concerns seem not to interest Jesus. Go for the gold! Jesus says: Risk, connive, get that field, grab the treasure! If you've ever read anything by Willimon, you'll recognize his humor here. He's trying to get us to see Jesus as story teller. Jesus, according to Willimon, is explaining the "all or nothing" approach we need to take in acquiring the kingdom. The story gets our attention, which is what Jesus wants, but he is not advocating questionable business practices, is he?

6. One more thing. Notice Jesus' question to the disciples when he is finished teaching: "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asks. hilariously, unbelievably, the disciples reply with a simple "Yes," which you just know was not completely true! And to compound whatever fogginess they may have had anyway, Jesus then says that if you do understand all this, you'll be like a homeowner who brings out "new treasures as well as old." What that means is still a bit of a mystery even 2,000 years later!

"Have you understood all these things?" Sure. Got it. Discuss what happens here at the end of Jesus' teaching!