

# **The kingdom of heaven is like ... what?**

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

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**Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

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<sup>31</sup> [Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

<sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

<sup>52</sup> And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Let me ask you something, and this is a question you may never have asked yourself before, but a question that is at the center of Jesus’ teaching, at the center of the gospel stories. In other words, if we don’t confront this question, we haven’t got a clue as to what Jesus came among us to do.

Are you ready?

Okay, here it is: **Have you ever experienced a joy which radically and decisively changed all of your priorities, which caused you to let go of everything that was previously important to you? Have you ever experienced a joy like that?**

Tell me, isn't that what Jesus is asking us in this barrage of parables?

In chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel, we find one parable after another with this same truth at the center – namely, there is something of infinite value in life, and often it's hidden, it's not obvious, you have to look for it, but once you have found it, once you have uncovered it, once you recognize its value, you will let go of everything else in life so that you can have this one thing.

If you know what that means, if you have done that with your life, Jesus is saying, then you know what the kingdom of heaven is all about.

I don't know if you've ever seen this before, or noticed it, or if you've ever thought deeply about it, but Jesus had one central teaching. Only one. One core truth. And throughout his ministry, he never deviated from this truth.

Every day he woke up and went to work, and what came out of his mouth, or what he demonstrated in his actions, was this same truth, again and again and again.

In Mark's gospel, chapter one, we read that after John the Baptist was arrested, which seems to have been the signal that Jesus was waiting for, the cue that his work should begin, after John was arrested, the gospel says, he **“came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying [this was his message and what everyone responded to] ‘the time is fulfilled [or the time has come], and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”**

It's astonishing ... in a way. I mean, that Jesus had such a simple message. We make it very complicated. But in reality it wasn't.

During my interview with the search committee from this church, if you had said to me, **“Doug, what themes do you like to preach about? What are the subjects you come back to again and again?”**, I could have said, **“Well, there's just one. The kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe it. That's pretty much my entire sermon repertoire.”**

If I had said that, you would have thought, **“We can't have that. The same message every week?”**

And yet, that's what Jesus said. The kingdom of heaven – or the kingdom of God – those terms can be used interchangeably – because of his Jewish Christian audience, Matthew preferred to use the word “heaven” – the kingdom of heaven has come among you, recognize it, discover it, and then turn your life around because of it.

That's what it means to “repent.” Change directions. Change whatever you were doing to take hold of this one thing that is so precious.

So, let me come back to the question I asked you at the beginning, because – really – this question gets to the heart of what it means to have a spiritual life, and to be a follower of Jesus Christ: **Have you ever experienced a joy which radically and decisively changed all of your priorities, which caused you to let go of everything that was previously important to you?**

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus would walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and he would say to the fishermen there, **“Is this what you want? Is this work bringing any joy at all to you in life?”**

Or he would approach a tax collector, and he would say something similar. **“Have you found joy in your life? Have you found the deep meaning that you were hoping to find in this work?”**

And – I think you know how this goes – one by one they dropped everything to follow him. There were 12 core followers. These were the ones Jesus decided to give himself to. He spent just about every hour of every day with them, teaching and answering their questions and mediating their conflicts.

But there were other followers beyond those 12 men.

At one time – in the earliest days of Jesus’ ministry – there were hundreds, sometimes thousands.

Mark’s gospel tells us that **“a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon,”** in what is now Lebanon.

This was an extraordinary movement, from quite a large geographical area. No wonder it caught the attention of the Roman authorities. And not only was this a big crowd, drawn to a charismatic teacher – I suppose there’s nothing new about that – this crowd was hungry for a spiritual truth.

And that spiritual truth – or what they heard Jesus say – was that there is something in you and in me and among us that only needs to be uncovered. And once we uncover it, once we find it and identify it, then we need to devote our lives to it.

This crowd was so hungry for that truth that they left their businesses behind, something their father had built in order to leave to them. They left it behind. They left families behind. They were willing to sacrifice everything, simply because Jesus pointed to a kind of joy, a pearl of great price, a treasure hidden in a field, something that they were desperately hungry for, something that we are all hungry for, something that every human being wants and needs.

Some you know that an Arab Christian pastor by the name of Elias Chacour has had quite an impact on my life. I met him on my first visit to the Israel, and last year I brought members of this church to see him at his school in Galilee. He retired a few years ago as the Archbishop of Galilee.

Father Chacour – or Archbishop Chacour – has been a guest in my home in the U.S. a couple of times, and he has preached for me as well.

On one of his visits to the Chicago area, because a few of my church members worked at the Options Exchange, I took Father Chacour to the trading floor to see my church members at work.

And markets are almost entirely electronic these days, but when we visited there were still these guys – almost always men – in bright jackets calling out their orders. And the trading floor feels like a casino, with blinking lights and lots of yelling.

And like a casino, no one is smiling very much. Anyway, Father Chacour with his long cassock and beard, looking very much like an Orthodox priest, approached one of the traders, someone I didn't know, and said, "**Are you happy?**"

And it was such a startling question. And I don't even remember anymore if the man answered. But at that moment I remembered this story from the early chapters of the gospels. Jesus would simply ask, "**Have you found any joy in what you are doing?**"

A few years ago, a ministry scholar by the name of Kenda Creasy Dean published a book about youth ministry which seemed to speak a prophetic word that the church needed to hear.

And still needs to hear. And as with all prophetic words, it was not easy to hear.

What she said was that young people are growing up and leaving the church because we think they want to be entertained, when what they really want is something to die for, something to give their lives to.

And everyone who has ever done youth ministry knew that she was speaking the truth. While the church was busy planning the next cool activity – and trust me that there are no more creative people on the planet than the people who do youth ministry – while we are busy thinking of the next program, the youth we want to reach are leaving to find something that is worthy of their time.

They want to die for a cause, and we give them snacks, and then we pat ourselves on the back.

As I said, this was hard to hear. For one thing, parents don't want their children out there dying for some cause, but what Kenda Dean identified in her work with the young adult mind is that that is precisely how we are wired.

When you are 17 or 18 – or 63 years old, for that matter – you want to know that you there is something out there that is worthy of your time and your gifts and your life. And you want more than anything to give yourself to that one thing.

As I think you know, people will work long hours, and they will sacrifice time with their families and children, and they will sacrifice their own health, if they think they have found something worthy. This is how we are made.

I am concerned about young people of course, and I am concerned that we give them something more than entertainment, but I am also concerned about older people. Some of us have poured ourselves into our children's lives. Or our marriages. Or a business that has employed us.

And we give and give until we are depleted, and then – sometimes, not always, but often enough – we discover that our devotion was not reciprocated. The thing (or the person) we gave ourselves to did not love us as completely as we loved it. And frankly, it can be a terrible discovery.

It can be shattering. And we can spend whatever remains of our lives feeling angry and resentful and bitter about it, or we can look once again for that joy that is hidden in a field.

I'm not saying, by the way, that we shouldn't love our children, or our spouses, or our work. What I'm trying to say is that those things – however precious they may be – are not the pearl of great price. There is something more.

A few years ago, in the United States, a program was launched called "Teach for America." Maybe you've heard of it. Schools in the U.S., especially in the larger cities, were not attracting the best teachers, and the students were not receiving good educations, and the situation was bleak. In fact, worse than bleak.

And so the idea behind Teach for America was that the best university graduates in the country might be willing to give 2 or 3 years of their lives, some of the best years of their lives, after graduation to teach in these failing schools, in some of the least attractive areas of the country. The income would be very, very low, but the experience – perhaps – would be valuable. That was the hope.

Anyway, one day a recruiter from Teach for America came to Duke University, one of the leading universities in the U.S. Recruiters are nothing new on university campuses. This is how many students find jobs after graduation.

The recruiter reserved a room on campus for one afternoon and promised to explain the new program to anyone who was interested. When the time came, the recruiter found that the room was filled to overflowing, every seat taken, and more standing in the back and in the aisles, and the students were eagerly waiting to hear the story.

Instead, according to what I was told, the recruiter entered, looked briefly at all the students, and then said, **“I can see that you all come from good families, and that you are all very smart students, and that you are going to be heavily recruited by big firms, and that most of you are therefore not going to be interested in this program. But I will leave a few brochures up here on the desk in case anyone is interested.”**

And having said that, the recruiter left.

There was a stunned silence for a few seconds, this was not what anyone that day was expecting, and then suddenly the entire group rushed forward to get one of those brochures. Teach for America has enjoyed – against all odds – a great deal of success in the United States.

And why? Because there is within us – within most of us – a desire to give ourselves to something.

I don't have any Teach for America brochures today, but I do have a simple message for you. I know that most of us would like to have financial success and some of the nicer things in life, good holidays in interesting places, and so forth, and so you may not be all that interested in what I have to say.

But on the off chance that you have discovered that money isn't everything. On the off chance that you've discovered that the nicer things in life are nice, but not of surpassing value. On the off chance that you are still hungry for more, I want to say this one thing to you: There is something more that is available to you.

Unfortunately, it is hidden. It is not obvious to everyone. Often people step over it because they don't really notice what it is. But to those who recognize it, to those who make the discovery, it is worth more than any job, it is worth more than any investment, it is worth more than life itself.

And I am speaking of course about the kingdom of heaven ... this spiritual reality that defies description, but that is as real as anything else in our lives.

If you would like to give your life to something, something that is truly worthy of your time and your talents and your life itself, I hope you will begin to look for what has been inside you and all around us for your entire life.

Please pray with me. Dear God, open our eyes to see this thing that has been there all the time. Help us to give ourselves to the one thing that can bring lasting joy and peace. Help us to say yes to the pearl of great price. Amen.