

*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 26, 2020*

(Read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

*Bring Forth the Kingdom- refrain (TFWS 2190)*

Bring forth the Kingdom of mercy,  
bring forth the Kingdom of peace;  
bring forth the Kingdom of justice,  
bring forth the City of God!

- Marty Haugen

Centering Words:

No matter what happened yesterday, now is the time to call upon God, to lay our lives before our creator, and to proclaim God's wonderful deeds to one another. Now is the time to worship. (*The Abingdon Worship Annual, 2020, 162*)

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

Prayer of the Day:

Ruler of heaven and earth, your kingdom is a great treasure, a treasure of love, mercy, justice and peace. We will gladly give up all that we have to live in your kingdom and to follow you. We long for your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Though we may feel small and insignificant like a tiny mustard seed, you give us the power to grow into a great shrub as does the mustard seed. May we be the yeast that leavens the whole of creation so your kingdom does come. This we know through Christ our Lord who taught us to pray:

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word  
O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Old Testament Reading      Genesis 29: 15-28

Psalms 105: 1-11, 45b

Epistle Reading              Romans 8: 26-39

Special Music

Gospel Reading                      Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Sermon                                      *The Kingdom of Heaven*

Hymn

*Seek Ye First (UMH, 405)*

Seek ye first the kingdom of God  
and his righteousness,  
and all these things shall be added unto you.  
Allelu, alleluia!

Ask and it shall be given unto you;  
seek and ye shall find;  
knock, and the door shall be opened unto you,  
Allelu, alleluia!

- Karen Lafferty

Benediction:

Go forth knowing that you are part of God's family. Go forth proclaiming the praises of God. Go forth in the assurance that Christ is always with us. Go forth to bring the kingdom of God wherever you are. Amen. (Abingdon Worship Annual 2020, 165)

Response:

*God Be With You till We Meet Again (UMH 673)*

God be with you till we meet again;  
by his counsels guide, uphold you,  
with his sheep securely fold you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

In each of these parables Jesus is teaching the disciples about the kingdom of heaven. Each parable says something about the kingdom of heaven. But before we go into each parable, we need to address what is meant by the phrase “the kingdom of heaven.”

When we hear that phrase, we probably think of that city of gold up in the sky on some cloud. I always wondered which cloud heaven was on in the same way I now wonder which cloud all my information is on. But in Matthew’s context heaven was not about the sky or clouds. In Jewish writings the term heaven was often used as a substitute for the divine name, particularly as it became considered sacrilegious to use the divine name. So, the Kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with the Kingdom of God.

The word *baselia*, translated as kingdom, does not have a geographic meaning. It is not talking about a kingdom as in the British kingdom. It is a noun of action, more appropriately translated as reign or rule. My lifetime has been during the kingdom, the rule or reign, of Elizabeth II. So as Matthew talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, he is talking about God’s reign, God’s sovereign rule over creation.

This Kingdom of Heaven is present now as God’s reign is occurring now. God is ruling over all creation as people do God’s will. But people rebel and do not do God’s will. So, the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven is in the future. The Kingdom of Heaven is God’s rule in creation now as we submit to God’s rule and in the future on the day of judgement when God’s rule is fulfilled and all submit to God’s rule.

In these parables Jesus is instructing his disciples in what the Kingdom of Heaven, God’s reign, will be like.

The first is the parable of the mustard seed. We have seen mustard seeds and they are rather tiny. Mustard bushes usually grow to about two to six feet in height but can grow to ten feet. I have a picture of one we saw in Galilee that was almost as high as a light pole. So, it can grow pretty tall. But it does not grow to be a mighty tree.

If we take it symbolically, trees were often representative of empires and kingdoms. In the book of Daniel, the Babylonian empire is represented as a cedar. Oaks were symbolic of Rome. A mighty tree represented a mighty empire. But Jesus equates the Kingdom of Heaven, not with some mighty majestic tree, but with an ordinary annual herb. God's Kingdom is not in the mighty and spectacular, but in the ordinary, mundane acts of every day as we live according to God's will. As we continue to live in God's Kingdom, that is according to God's will, God's Kingdom will grow into full fruition.

The next parable of the Kingdom of Heaven is also of a mundane everyday act, a woman kneading dough. The woman takes three measures, which would be a lot of flour, and mixes in yeast. We all know what happens when you put yeast in flour. It grows. It gets bigger and bigger. So, this parable seems to be pointing to the fact that God's kingdom will grow and grow like yeast mixed with flour.

But there is also something else about this parable. The word, *enekrupsev*, means hid. It does not mean to mix, as is translated, but to hide. She did not mix the yeast in the dough; she hid the yeast in the dough. This indicates that the Kingdom of Heaven is not always obvious. It may be unseen, unperceived by people. In the context of the passage, it is that the Kingdom of Heaven is being revealed through Jesus to the disciples but remains hidden to the religious leaders and the general public. But even as it remains hidden, the Kingdom continues to grow.

So, these two parables indicate that the Kingdom of Heaven is not always obvious. The reign of God is not in the spectacular or mighty, but in the ordinary and mundane. The Kingdom of Heaven does not grow by great preachers, intellectual theologians, or extraordinary saints, but by ordinary people living their lives according to the will of God.

My church history professor was wont to mention that for every Peter and Paul there were a hundred or a thousand Joes and Josephines spreading the gospel by simply living their lives in a different way, the way of the Kingdom of Heaven instead of the kingdom of the world. We continue to spread the Gospel as we live our lives according to the Kingdom of Heaven instead of the kingdom of the world. This is a Kingdom that rules by love rather than power.

How the Kingdom of Heaven may be revealed is seen in the next two parables. In the first a man unexpectedly finds a treasure hidden in a field. What he does next is rather unexpected. Rather than telling the owner of the field about the treasure, which would be the proper thing to do, he goes and sells everything he has to buy the field. He was not looking for treasure, he stumbled upon it. When he walked across the field, he did not expect to find a treasure but there it was.

We may not be looking for the Kingdom of Heaven and its treasures when suddenly it is revealed to us. It may not be in the way we expect. N. T Wright tells of going to a concert where two selections were being played. The second selection was a well know selection by a famous composer. The first was an unknown selection by an unknown composer. He enjoyed the first selection just as much or even more than the second, but he would not have gone to the concert if just the first selection had been advertised. He discovered a hidden treasure of music when he was not looking for it. We may find the treasures of the Kingdom when we are not looking for them.

In the second parable a merchant of pearls is buying. He is looking for the best, most exquisite pearls he can find. He finds one that is perfect. One that is almost priceless in its beauty. He runs out, sells all his other pearls and whatever else he has and buys it. He had found what he was looking for but even more.

We may be looking for the Kingdom of Heaven. We may be looking to discover God's will in our lives. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Surprised by Joy*, tells of his quest to rationally explain Christianity by studying the Bible and all the great theologians, when he simply realized that one day he felt joy, the joy of knowing God through Jesus Christ. John Wesley, while searching his soul for God's will after his failed mission to Georgia, went reluctantly to a meeting on Aldersgate Street where his heart was strangely warmed, and he knew that God had saved him. Both Wesley and Lewis were searching and found even more than they expected. Sometimes, when we look for the Kingdom of Heaven, we find that it is even better than we expected.

Notice though that in both these cases the men sold all that they had to obtain the treasure and the pearl. In order to get the treasures, they could not hold onto anything that they had. It took everything they had to get the treasure they had found.

In order to obtain the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven we must give up all. It is not that we have to sell all that we have and join a monastery or convent, but that we submit ourselves completely to the Kingdom of God. We submit to the reign of God, letting God rule our lives completely. We follow God's will for us in all that we do, and all that we do reflects God's kingdom. It is giving up our control and giving God control of our hearts, our minds, our thoughts and our attitudes as well as our actions.

It is not about getting into the Kingdom of Heaven in the sweet by and by. It is about living in the Kingdom of Heaven now, today, wherever you are reading these words, watching on Facebook or our website. The Kingdom of Heaven is here and now. We can live in it here and now as we give up ourselves and give all that we are over to God. We give ourselves over to the loving God who created us to be as God created us. We give up how the world created us according to the rule of the world to be the creation of the creator, living in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then, as we are all caught up in that great net on the final day we may be put into God's basket and not tossed in the fire. It is as we live in the Kingdom of Heaven now, that we will live in the Kingdom of Heaven for all eternity.