

Year A; Proper 12 (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52) Five Parables of the Kingdom

We just heard Jesus tell us that the Kingdom of God is like five different things...a mustard seed, a woman who mixes yeast in 3 measures of flour, a treasure hidden in a field, a merchant who finds a pearl of great value, and a net that collects fish of every kind. Now we need to figure out what exactly Jesus is saying about the Kingdom of God when he uses these different descriptions.

Jesus wasn't about the neat and tidy "so the moral of the story is..." sort of thing. Jesus' messages were revolutionary. Jesus' messages were transforming. Jesus wanted to shock his listeners, upset the status quo, shake things up. So what's so earth shattering and shocking about these parables of the Kingdom?

Let's start with the mustard seed. Jesus says it's the smallest of seeds. It is small but there's smaller. Then he says it grows into "the greatest of shrubs" and all of the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches. Hmm. That doesn't sound quite right...The greatest of shrubs? Shrubs aren't great. They're shrubs with skinny little branches that maybe a few little birds could build nests in but certainly not all the birds of the air.

Jesus' listeners would have known right away that he was deliberately saying something wrong - he was deliberately making a huge exaggeration. Why?

Well, Jesus' listeners would have also known that Jesus was playing on a story from Scripture. They had the Scriptures memorized in a way that we don't need to... They would have been immediately reminded that, in the Book of Daniel, the great kingdom of Babylon is described as a towering, majestic tree. The earthly kingdom of Babylon - that great kingdom that conquered Jerusalem and took its people as slaves - that kingdom is described as a massive, strong tree that supports all life around it, and in contrast, Jesus says, "Well, my kingdom is a shrub." Jesus is hammering home the point that the Kingdom of God is nothing like an earthly kingdom. Earthly kingdoms value military might, political prowess, and money. That mighty tree - the earthly kingdom - is looking down on Jesus' little shrub and sneering but Jesus is saying, what the world views as weakness, is the strength of God's kingdom - compassion, kindness, doing for others, loving others - that's strength. When a hand is given in friendship... The Kingdom of God has come near. When you listen as your friend unloads her troubles... The Kingdom of God has come near... When your song of love brings tears of joy to your listeners' eyes... The Kingdom of God has come near. We are the good fish in the net mixed in with the other fish. We live in a

world that values power and money but every time we turn our back on that, when we show love and compassion to the people around us, God's Kingdom becomes visible through us.

Let's move on to the next parable...The Kingdom of God is like a woman who mixes yeast in three measures of flour. As modern readers, we may think this is meant to say 'a little goes a long way' or 'the kingdom starts small and grows'. Maybe...but remember...Jesus liked to shock his listeners to get them thinking. Once again, Jesus' listeners would have known something that maybe we don't. While we might think of three measures of flour as about three cups of flour, Jesus' listeners knew that three measures was about 50 pounds of flour - bag, after bag, after bag of flour. This woman wasn't baking bread for her family. She was baking enough bread for the whole town and then some. Jesus' listeners would have also been reminded right away of another story...Abraham and Sarah. When three angels showed up at Abraham's tent, he said to Sarah, "honey - we've got guests - mix up three measures of flour and bake some cakes." Hundreds of cakes for three guests. So, Jesus' words - three measures of flour - take us back to the time when God made his promise to Abraham - that he'd be the father of many nations with descendents more numerous than the stars. Hundreds of years had passed since that promise and Jesus was pointing out that God has been faithful to that promise of abundance.

Abraham's generous hospitality to the three angels and to others was well known and held up as the standard. It became a distinguishing quality of early Christians. In fact, writers outside of the bible wrote in amazement that those people known as Christians shared everything with each other and even shared with people outside of their community. Why? Because of the God they knew in Jesus...the God of awesome abundance and generosity. You don't need to bake bread for your entire town... in buying a cup of coffee for a friend, the Kingdom of God has come near. Sharing a meal you've prepared, giving your extra coat away, fundraising for a cause - The Kingdom of God has come near.

The next two parables are about how the Kingdom of God changes us. First, a man finds a treasure in a field and, in his joy, sells everything so that he can have that treasure. The key word here is joy. That man sells everything because all he wants is that treasure - he is fulfilled, he lacks nothing, all he wants is in that field and he is filled with joy. Christian joy isn't like normal happiness. Christian joy runs deep and comes from knowing that Jesus saved us and we will have eternal life with him. It doesn't mean that we won't be sad. It doesn't mean that nothing bad will happen to us. In fact, St. Paul writes to persecuted Christians that we can face our hardships with joy because we have the

hope that comes from knowing that Jesus died for us. This hope pulls us through the bad stuff, keeps us going. That's Christian joy.

Second, a merchant goes in search of fine pearls and finds one amazing one and sells everything to get it. This parable is tricky because people think the Kingdom is that beautiful, valuable pearl. But that's not what Jesus says. He says the Kingdom is like the merchant in search of fine pearls. The merchant finds the one and gives up everything to have it. Not just some of his stuff...everything. Now, a merchant is someone who buys and sells things. So, if this merchant just sold everything for the beautiful pearl, he's no longer buying and selling things. He's no longer a merchant. He is not the same anymore. The Kingdom of God changes us. Being filled with the joy of being saved and the promise of everlasting life changes us and we are different from others around us who live in an earthly kingdom. When I decided to explore my faith more deeply, to learn more about God, his plan, his mission and our part in that, I changed. One thing that happened was that I found my voice. I stood up for what I believed in and I stood up for the people around me who weren't yet able to do that for themselves.

I've said a lot so let me just sum up the main points. God's Kingdom is not like an earthly kingdom. What the world sees as weakness, God sees as strength - our compassion and love. Part of that love means

being abundantly generous and marking ourselves as Christians.

Experiencing the Kingdom of God changes who we are and fills us with joy.

And finally, Jesus never leaves off his teaching without telling us what to do - hearers must also be doers. So Jesus tells us to take the old - the word of God that's been around for thousands of years - and mix it with his new teaching - what the world needs now. This congregation has a head start on this - you are very warm, loving, generous, spiritual people. You are a gift. I knew it the first time I came here when I felt welcomed and cared for. So let your light shine before others - here in this space, in Echo Bay, on the Island, in the Sault, wherever you go - that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven. Who knows, maybe someday we'll hear a parable that starts, "The Kingdom of God is like a little church not far from Sault Ste Marie..."