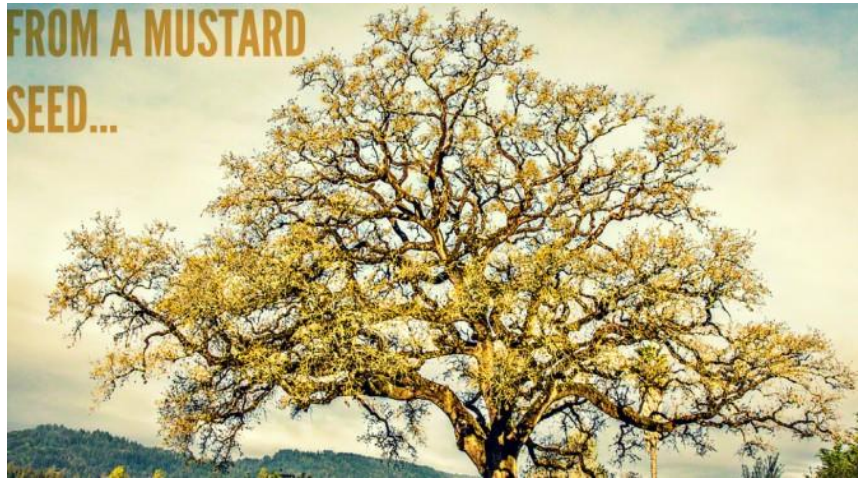


Sermon – July 30, 2023  
“The kingdom of heaven is like”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to week nine of our season of Pentecost journey this summer. In a few short weeks, we will be moving onto the season of Kingdomtide, and it will not be long until we have arrived at the season of Advent and the start of a new Christian year. I hope that everyone is enjoying the summer warmth and is ready for a bit of a cool down. We were blessed this week to spend five mornings with seven wonderful children who came to the 5-day club. We were also blessed by Zory's heart for Jesus and her desire to share him with others. I want to take a minute to thank Judy and Kevin for their faithful work to bring the Good News and 5-day clubs to the children of Northumberland County. And let me express our thanks to everyone for your prayers and assistance with making another 5-day club go so well. We were greatly blessed to spend time with children who are seeking to grow in their knowledge and love of Jesus.

As we listened to the reading of our scripture lesson this morning, we might have picked up on the repetition of the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like." In the selected readings, that

phrase is repeated five times as Jesus teaches about the kingdom of heaven through the sharing of some very short comparisons of the kingdom of heaven to everyday life and images the disciples and the crowds would understand. We might ask ourselves, “Why does Jesus provide such an array of examples in his teaching about the kingdom of heaven? Is the kingdom of heaven so complex that we need many examples to define it?” Or maybe Jesus understood that the disciples and the crowds did not yet understand the kingdom of heaven and what it was actually like, and he needed to give additional instruction about its nature. We should ask ourselves if we understand what Jesus teaches about the kingdom of heaven. There may be some among us who have the idea that when we die, we go to the gates of heaven, face judgment, and if we are good enough, we get into heaven. We need to ask ourselves if that is what Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of heaven. Is that what Jesus is teaching here with these comparisons? Let’s look at Jesus’ teaching in Matthew found in the kingdom of heaven comparisons he provides.

Let’s put ourselves this morning in the situation of a person in first century Israel if we can. There is an occupied country. At this point in Israel’s history, they are under the rule of Rome, having been conquered many years ago by the expanding Roman empire. Some of the power of Rome was known to Israel, but many of the citizens of Israel would have had little concept of the greater Roman empire and how vast it was in the days of Jesus. The people of Israel, for the most part, wanted to be a free and independent nation again. They knew of their history from the teaching in the Torah, and most would have been able to tell stories of King David and his son King Solomon and the large kingdom of Israel they established with God’s help when they ruled in Israel. Many in Israel longed for an army to be established, led by the Messiah, and for that army to overthrow Rome and lead Israel back into its past days as an independent nation. The expectation among most of the citizens of Israel was that when the Messiah appeared, the kingdom he would establish would be set up immediately and they would be free of Rome. Those in the crowd and among the disciples, when they hear Jesus teach about a coming kingdom of heaven, would have been anticipating the earthly kingdom they were expecting. When Jesus begins to teach about the kingdom of heaven, he does not begin to outline the military needs to be put in place to defeat Rome’s might, but instead talks about mustard seeds, leaven, treasures buried in a field, pearls of great value, and a fishing net. These are not what a crowd expecting a military challenge to Rome would have been thinking. These are items

of common life in Israel. They are all items the people listening to Jesus would have known well. Let's look at the comparisons Jesus makes with each of these items to the kingdom of heaven and see what we can learn that might change our own understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

First is the mustard seed, a very small seed that typically sprouts in five days and can reach up to 20 feet in height. It has a very small start but rapidly grows into something large. So large does it grow that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. The Old Testament prophecy about the nation of Babylon had a similar reference to the birds of the air. There, it was a reference to all of the nations of the world that Babylon ruled over. Here, the idea may be the same, the rapid growth of the kingdom of heaven will continue until all of the nations of the world are included.

Next is the woman who takes three measures of flour and mixes in a small amount of leaven and works the dough until all of the dough from the three measures is leaven. We need to know that three measures of flour are almost a bushel of flour. Bread from such an amount of flour would feed over 100 people. The image that Jesus uses of a woman working a large amount of flour could be the weekly community baking of bread that was done in the villages where one woman prepared bread for the town. We might also recall that when Abraham is visited by the three strangers in the land of Canaan, Abraham also uses three measures for the amount of flour Sarah prepares. It is an extravagant amount of flour. Leaven is fermented dough that is set aside before the bread is baked so that it can be used to make bread that rises. The idea of the parable is that a small amount is put to work in a much larger situation and though hidden, works until the entire amount of flour is transformed. As in the mustard seed comparison, the kingdom of heaven in this comparison has a small start in the beginning but brings about the transformation of a much larger amount with patient work. The idea of transformation is part of this comparison as the bread is transformed completely to leavened bread. The kingdom of heaven works the same way; small efforts hidden away in the world continue to work until a larger transformation is completed.

The next "the kingdom of heaven is like" statement is connected to a man who finds a great treasure in a field. At this time in Israel, and in many places where there was strife, people would put their treasures in the ground in jars to keep them safe from invading armies. They would put silver and gold coins along with jewels into a jar and bury the jar in a field to keep them safe. As recently as the 1970s, a large jar filled with silver coins was found in the Middle

East buried in a field. The point of the comparison here is not the size of the treasure but that it is large and the one who finds it is willing to sell all that he has in order to buy the field and then receive the treasure. If he had removed the treasure, it would have been considered stealing, but since he goes and purchases the field, he owns the treasure as well. The connection to the kingdom of heaven is the idea that one who finds the treasure, the kingdom of heaven, is willing to part with all he has in order to acquire such a treasure.

The comparison of the pearl to the kingdom of heaven is similar to the comparison of the treasure. Even in the first century, pearls were considered valuable. Unlike the worker in the field, the merchant is searching for a pearl of great value and finds one that is beyond all other pearls. In response to his discovery, he goes and sells all else he owns so that he might be able to acquire this valuable pearl. The merchant recognizes the value of the pearl he has discovered and willingly works to purchase this rare item. The kingdom of heaven is like the pearl in that those who are searching for the things of God find what they are looking for in the kingdom of heaven and they are willing to give up all else they own to be part of the kingdom. The idea of selling all or working to be able to purchase the pearl has two ways of being exhibited in our kingdom of heaven living. The first is almsgiving, the generous giving of what is in our hand to meet the needs of others. As our hearts are moved to be generous towards others, we surrender our possessions and are able to acquire the pearl of great value. Another way of seeing our lives changed to acquire the pearl is to strive with all of our heart, soul, and might towards personal perfection, rejecting the values found in the world and embracing the values of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>i</sup> As we grow into the image of Christ, we move toward the acquisition of the pearl of great value.

And the last of the comparisons is the fishing net. The net Jesus references would be a very long net with floats on the top and weights on the bottom. The net would be put out into the water by boats or from shore and then the fishermen would pull it to shore with ropes catching everything as it is pulled in. Notice Jesus mentions that it catches fish of every kind. When the fish are pulled from the sea, the fishermen sit down and separate the good fish from the bad. The idea for the fishermen would be for them to separate the fish they could sell or eat from those they could not. There are 24 varieties of fish in the Sea of Galilee, and most are edible. The bad fish are those without scales that could not be eaten due to the Levitical food laws. The good fish are kept, but the bad are thrown out. Jesus interrupts this comparison for his disciples and

consequently for us. The fishermen are angels who come at the end of the age and separate the good from the evil. The evil are thrown into the fire, separated from the good for all time.

After Jesus shares these comparisons, he asks the disciples another question. He asks them if they understand all of the teaching he has given them with these comparisons and they reply “yes” they understand. Whether they understand the attributes of the kingdom of heaven at this point is not clear in Matthew’s Gospel, but they now have teaching about what the kingdom of heaven is like, how it comes about, and what they should look for in those seeking the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ disciples are to be like the scribes and teach others the truth they have received about the kingdom of heaven, the not yet but already present in breaking kingdom of heaven. Jesus will send them out with their master’s treasure to teach what he has taught them.

The question Jesus asks his disciples is a question we as followers of Christ should ask ourselves, “Do we understand the kingdom of heaven?” We are in a different place than the disciples when Jesus shared these treasures about the kingdom of heaven with them. We are on the other side of the cross and, as such, we see Jesus’ teaching in a very different light. We have the Holy Scriptures to read and study and we have Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth as we read God’s word. The kingdom of Rome has long ago faded into the books of history. Other kingdoms have risen and fallen away, and others will yet rise, but over time they also will fade away. Yet the kingdom of heaven continues to grow. Planted as the word of God into hearts of people and nurtured by the body of Christ at work in the fields of ripe harvest, the kingdom of God continues to grow. We in the United States and especially in the mainline churches may not be seeing the growth of the kingdom, and we pray that with our disaffiliation from the UMC, we will again focus on working with Jesus in his mission to grow the kingdom of heaven, but in many places across the globe, the growth of the kingdom continues to move forward as hearts are transformed with the love of Jesus Christ. Like the mustard seeds that grow into trees for the birds of the air to nest in, so also the kingdom of heaven continues to grow. Just as the leaven was mixed into the three measures of flour, so still does the leaven of God’s word and love continue to transform those lost in sin into citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Many today come across treasures of God’s word buried in fields that are books, reading material, and online communications allowing them to discover the treasure of Jesus Christ and to sell all they have to buy the field where they find the treasure of the kingdom of heaven. Others are searching for

the kingdom, seeking God, seeking peace from sin that stirs their very soul, and when Jesus is shared with them, when they experience the treasure that is the steadfast love of God, they also surrender all of themselves and follow Jesus into the kingdom of heaven. We live in the time when the net of God is still out catching fish. The net of God's love has not yet been drawn in but is still catching souls for the kingdom of heaven. Souls are being won, lives are being transformed, the kingdom of God that started with Jesus' teaching in Galilee is growing in many of the nations of the world. There is more work to be done. There are people here in Northumberland County who need to be reached, who are seeking pearls of great value, and who are waiting for someone to come and share the steadfast love of God with them. There will come a day, the last day, the end of the time of God's open net, when the full net of God's love is drawn in and the evil and good caught in it are separated.

Have we understood all this? Do we also grasp the ideas of the kingdom of heaven Jesus is seeking to teach to his followers? Can we take what Jesus is teaching and share the treasures of his teaching, treasures of our master, with those we are led to by Holy Spirit in this place? We look around in our country and the kingdom does not seem to be growing but losing ground. The transformation of lives from the small amount of leaven seems not to be effective in transforming the large measure of flour we live in in the world today. The world seems unaffected by our efforts and the efforts of so many Christians. Yet the mixing goes on as we respond to Jesus' call in our lives to share the Good News with others and to love each other. There is ongoing searching by many around us for the treasure of the kingdom of heaven, and we are called to help those searching to find the greatest treasure, the free gift of Jesus, salvation, and lead them into the kingdom of heaven. Those of the world are looking for answers and if we will follow Holy Spirit's guidance and boldly go and share the Good News of Jesus, then treasure will be found by those searching and they also will surrender their lives and enter the kingdom of heaven.

We are to be scribes who are trained for the kingdom of heaven and are helping our master, Jesus Christ, bring out his treasure and allow others to move from evil to righteous. We are to be the net of love that is out catching people and loving them into the kingdom of heaven. There will come a day when the net is pulled to shore, the fishing ends, and judgment occurs by righteous King Jesus. Do we understand the kingdom of heaven as Jesus teaches it? The kingdom of heaven is here now, and we who are followers of Jesus are to be at work in the

world, sharing the treasures of our master Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are to be at work in the now of the kingdom of heaven so that the nets may be filled and the nations may rest in the branches of the tree that was started by one small seed planted by Jesus, nurtured by his life, and made complete by his death and resurrection.

These short comparisons provide us guidance to pray for the growth of the kingdom of heaven. Each morning as we rise, pray that we might, with Jesus' help, plant a seed as small as a mustard seed that Jesus will grow into a tree in which birds of the air will come and build their nests. Ask Jesus each morning to guide us with Holy Spirit to the field of a person's life to plant a seed or seeds that day. Pray that we might be able to be at work in the kingdom of heaven working leaven, the love of Jesus, into the lives of people so that they might be transformed into citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Pray that as we work, we will find treasures of the kingdom through new depths of understanding of the Word made flesh and will surrender more of our lives to Jesus so that we might own those treasures we have discovered as we read and study God's word. Pray that Holy Spirit will lead us to a pearl of great price and open our eyes to new priceless insights about Jesus Christ and how to live in our community as Jesus would have us live. And finally, pray that we might become those who love God and love others in a manner that we are part of the net of love that is still out in the world catching people and loving them into the kingdom of heaven. Ask Holy Spirit to open our eyes so we might see those we are sent to, that we might hear their cries and act in Christ's love, and that we might be at work in this place, helping transform our hearts, homes, churches, and community into places where the kingdom of heaven is found.

*Pray with me: Jesus, transform us into the people of your kingdom that you would have us be. Let us be transformed by your steadfast love into your people. Lord, give us courage to be at work in the world, kneading leaven into the lives of those you lead us to, that the net of love we are part of will catch lost souls and love them into the kingdom of heaven. Come, Lord Jesus, come and help us understand these things and then go and do them, right here, right now. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> Snodgrass, Klyne R.. Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus . Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition p 305.