

Sermon – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

“Parables are not to be looked at, but are to be looked through” says William Sloane Coffin, a former pastor of Riverside Church. “When you do look through a parable, you see Jesus, and when you look through Jesus, you see, transparently the power of God at work.” April 21, 1985.

The parables Jesus told to his followers have an earthiness, or grittiness to them. He used everyday occurrences – sower of seed, weeds amongst wheat, a torn garment, and a lost coin - as illustrations for his followers. These illustrations invited them, and now us into contemplation on the meaning of the parable.

A parable invites us to search for truth rather than being spoon-fed an answer. It is often said that you cannot tell people the truth; you can only put them in a position where they can discover the truth for themselves. So this is what a parable does, it invites us to find truth that when understood will resonate with us for all time.

In today’s gospel Jesus continues to teach by parable. In these parables Jesus is teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven. First he says it is like a mustard seed, then like yeast or better translated leaven, then like hidden treasure in a field, a merchant searching for fine pearls and finally a net of fish, some good and some bad. Each one an ordinary part of someone’s life.

When we think of the kingdom of heaven we might be inclined to think of it in terms of the dream John experienced when he was incarcerated on the island of Patmos. His dream is revealed to us in the book of Revelation. His vision of the kingdom of heaven has gold streets and gold buildings; rivers as bright as crystal, trees adorned with abundant fruit, fine pearl encrusted gates, jewel encrusted foundations and walls of jasper.

The kingdom of heaven that Jesus describes in the parables we hear today might in contrast be rather dull and boring, a little disappointing to us, too close to our present life experiences to provide any great meaning. But this is the point. The kingdom of heaven is nearer to us than we think and is not some far off nirvana. The Son of God was born into this world in a stable in the back of an inn. The divine was born into the mundane, born into the ordinariness of life. The kingdom of heaven is like the most ordinary of things and like Jesus himself, this everyday world embodies the sacred, a meeting of the divine and the human.

In Matthew’s teaching of the life of Jesus we are told the first thing Jesus says when he comes back from the wilderness is “repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). He reveals this nearness every time he heals someone, every time he really sees someone that society has excluded and forgotten, and when he reaches out and spends time with women, outcasts and aliens. As the body of Christ we now take this role.

The kingdom of heaven is as close to us today as the smallest, most ordinary of things that we can too often overlook. A mustard seed is one of the tiniest seeds, much like a sesame or poppy seed. Once planted a mustard seed can yield a bush 10' – 12' high. But the bush is not fit for any great purpose rather it is an invasive plant, a weed that most farmers would want to see gone.

Likewise, yeast is a tiny ingredient in bread but has a dramatic effect on the dough. In the ancient Jewish tradition yeast, or leaven, is seen as a corruption or an impurity. Jesus uses these images of less than acceptable things and tiny forces of nature to illustrate what miraculous growth can occur in God's kingdom through the invasive and unpredictable nature of God's spirit.

In our lives we might be able to recall times when the smallest, nearest and seemingly innocent event or action, had a dramatic result either in your life or in the life of someone else. Maybe something wonderful occurred when we stopped holding life tightly to maintain predictability instead releasing one's grip on life and being surprised by the unpredictable. From such small gestures big things are possible.

As I was contemplating this truth in my own life I remembered a song from my youth by an Australian singer / songwriter Paul Kelly. The title of the song, and its refrain is "From Little Things Big Things Grow." The song became one of those standards that was played everywhere because it resonated so much with people.

The genesis of the song is the action of Vincent Lingiari, an aboriginal elder of the Gurindji people of northern Australia. After Australia was settled by the English in 1780 the founders declared the land *terra nullius*, or nobodies land. Thinking the aboriginal people too primitive to actually own land the declaration wiped away the 60,000-year history of the Aboriginal people occupying and using the land now known as Australia.

As a result pastoralists and ranchers claimed the land and forced the indigenous peoples into slavery, making them work for no wages, raping the women and destroying their culture. Sound familiar! In 1966, Vincent Lingiari a farm hand had had enough and led his people off Wave Hill cattle ranch. They settled in a camp nearby where they stayed in silent protest for 9 years. In 1975 the government finally settled with the rancher to hand back to the Gurindji people over 1,000 sq. miles, or one third of what was taken.

The protest and subsequent land return was the first successful land rights claim in Australia and the handover ceremony was a powerful symbol to everyone that the land originally belonged to the Aboriginal people. It was a powerful symbol too of one small action, followed by peaceful protest that started to make a significant injustice right. This was one of the first civil rights protests in Australia.

We might also recall the seemingly small action of Ms. Rosa Parks who refused to move off the white only seat on a Montgomery bus. Her silent action led to the Montgomery bus boycott and other civil rights actions that all contributed to the advancement of

colored peoples and the eventual outlawing of segregation. Whistleblowers are another group who make conscious decisions to highlight an injustice and often suffer significantly for their action. However, their actions can with persistence lead to big changes in the way organizations are managed, and wrongs are made right.

Our world and our lives are full of these Kingdom of Heaven moments. The kingdom of heaven is near to us, is invasive and unpredictable. Through these small actions the kingdom of heaven grows in incredible ways, on and on beyond anything that we can possibly imagine.

These actions are the treasure in the kingdom, the true and ultimate value of the kingdom. The next two parables tell of two people who gave up everything that was important to them to be able to secure the treasure. The paradox here is that a kingdom worth the price of a great pearl or hidden treasure is not made of gold or crystal or jasper but of bushes and bread.

Finally the parable of the net provides an illustration of how the end of the age might play out. Judgment will come and with judgment comes consequences, which for better or worse are decided in the present age. The promise of the kingdom is widely cast but the decision about the good and the bad will be made by the agents of God, and not by us.

We all have the responsibility to continue to make the small gestures of saying yes to God, to choose God's way that leads into the kingdom of heaven. The nearness of God's realm challenges us to choose this way daily. God's kingdom is not far off and remote. It is as close as close can be and all around you.

What small gesture are you open to today that will further grow the kingdom of heaven?

Amen