

Pastor's Message – 7/26/20  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

I don't know if they still do this, but about three years ago, I got a call saying that I had won \$1.7 million from Publishers' Clearing House and was I going to be home all day to receive the check? I was occupied that day, so I suggested the next day. He asked, "Don't you want this money?" "Thanks, but no thanks," I said. I guess I'm a little bit skeptical.

In Jesus' parables today, Jesus is talking about treasure. Ah, treasure! Who hasn't dreamed of finding a fabulous treasure? The lure of treasure prompts people to enter contests and sweepstakes. Publishers' Clearing House ads appeal to that fantasy by highlighting the reaction of a families and individuals who have just won millions of dollars. They are delirious with joy.

Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is the ultimate treasure. One of the parables today (v. 44) tells of a man who accidentally found a treasure buried in a field. He goes home and sells everything that he has so that he might purchase that field. His discovery was an accident, something valuable he surprisingly discovered in the process of doing something else. For many, the kingdom is not a treasure we have sought and found but that which has fallen in our laps by virtue of birth and baptism and God's grace.

All four parables in our Bible reading today are about the Kingdom of Heaven. Have you ever wondered what heaven is like? People in white choir robes lolling around on cottony clouds, plucking on harps? That's the iconic image of the newspaper cartoons -- based, in part, on the dreamlike visions of the book of Revelation, all thrown together randomly. Or, maybe it's a gleaming, celestial city, whose streets are paved with gold. (That comes from Revelation, also.)

The prophet Isaiah seems to think heaven is a great banqueting table, groaning with food and wine -- a sumptuous feast spread out upon a mountaintop. The Vikings would have liked that one well enough because their image of heaven was a vast, smoky mead-hall with joints of mutton forever turning on spits over the fire and drinking horns that never run dry.

From the beginning of time, human beings have tried to speculate about the nature of this place called "heaven" -- with very little success. The Bible speaks of heaven on numerous occasions but rarely provides any detail (and such detail as we do get in its pages resembles free-flowing poetic imagination as much as anything else).

The only honest answer is: Heaven is a mystery. It's a well-attested mystery in the Bible, but a mystery nonetheless. Our view of heaven, in this life, is rather like the view from a ship at sea, sailing through a dense fog. The lookout stands at the rail, peering into the gloom. From time to time, shapes seem to loom up and then vanish as quickly as they came. The chart says that somewhere out there is land, and the instrument readings confirm it, but even the sharpest-eyed lookout is unable to take it in.

So what is the kingdom of heaven like? A mustard seed. Leaven in a batch of dough. A treasure hidden in a field. A pearl of great price. A net, fairly bulging with fish.

This is no theological treatise Jesus gives us. It's more like a pile of snapshots. These parables are mere hints, suggestions, and intimations. They're probably the best he -- or anyone else -- could ever do. For the fault lies not in the explanation, but in the understanding of the listeners. How could our small, time-bound, earth-bound human minds possibly take in the reality of God's eternal realm? The best you and I can do, I'm afraid, is to trade in parables and dreams -- trusting that, one day, all will be revealed.

The five parables about heaven, only four of which we read included within this week's Sunday's suggested reading are quick snapshots, each revealing different facets of the wondrous reality that is the reign of God. The first two, the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, depict God's reign as a growing presence that is for now small and insignificant but whose growth into a substantial reality is inevitable (verses 31-33). The other three parables, the Treasure, the Pearl, focus on the giddy joy of discovering God's reign in the midst of the ordinary world (verses 44-52). God's grace is real and will yield abundantly.

Mustard seeds and yeast, seemingly small and insignificant, turn out to be tremendously important. Little things can matter a lot and can make a huge difference in how things turn out:

- \* A shuttle was destroyed because a few small tiles came off during its ascent into space. Another one was destroyed because of a faulty O-ring.

- \* A little bit of plaque in the wrong blood vessel and you have a heart attack.

- \* Unseen droplets of moisture in the air can cause a world-wide pandemic.

- \* A little dust in a laboratory can ruin the entire experiment.

- \* A little bit of love and forgiveness can heal a broken relationship.

- \* A little attention paid to a young boy or girl can help them realize how special they really are and how much God loves them.

The kingdom of God starts out in small ways and turns the world upside down.

Two parables I've read - it is said they are true - make the point. They are two stories about two Roman Catholic altar boys named Josef and Peter John.

Josef Brose lived in Yugoslavia. At age twelve, he was an altar boy and proud of it. The sanctuary was packed one Sunday morning. Josef took the crystal cruet filled with communion wine and marched proudly up the altar steps. As he got to the top step he tripped, dropped the crystal cruet, and watched as it smashed into 1,000 pieces. He knelt before the priest and said, "Father, forgive me, I have sinned."

The priest looked at Josef and said, "Get out! Get out of this church and don't ever come back again!"

Remember, this story is true.

Josef got out, and he never darkened the door of a church again for the rest of his life. Josef Brose grew up to become someone many of you will remember -- Josef Brose became Marshall Tito, and under his rule in what was once Yugoslavia the church was oppressed and hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of people were slaughtered.

Meanwhile, Peter John, also twelve years old, was growing up in Peoria, Illinois. His Roman Catholic church was packed one Sunday morning, too. The bishop was there. Peter John was the altar boy and proud of it. Peter John took the crystal cruet filled with

communion wine and marched proudly up the altar steps. As he got to the top step, he tripped, dropped the crystal cruet, and watched as it smashed into 1,000 pieces.

The bishop looked at Peter John, and then said to the congregation: "Friends, our altar boy, Peter John, has given us a wonderful example of God's redemption and grace. Is there any one of us who hasn't had a shattering experience? Peter John, thank you for giving us an illustration of redemption and the gospel. For when our lives are broken apart in a million pieces, there is a God who can bring resurrection out of crucifixion."

"Peter John, the truth of the matter is that God is going to put your broken pieces back together and make you a stronger altar boy, a stronger Catholic, a stronger Christian. Let me confess my sin, Peter John. When I was an altar boy, I, too, dropped a crystal cruet -- just like you. I dropped a cruet; you dropped a cruet. Maybe you'll be a bishop, just like me." With that he gave a big wink and went on with the Mass.

Peter John did grow up and did become a Bishop: Bishop Peter John Fulton Sheen. Bishop Sheen was the first Catholic television evangelist and was seen by millions of people on Tuesday evenings in the 1950s. His homilies brought hope to a world of hurt and hatefulness, where peoples' lives are shattered and broken every day.

It's all in the story you tell and how you tell it. Jesus told stories, saying "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Listen to the parables you are telling with your life. Are you telling kingdom stories?

The little snippets of parable we have today about the Kingdom of Heaven all have a happy ending. The tiny seed grows large, all the dough becomes leavened, a treasure is found and presumably owned, and a beautiful pearl is purchased. The results are tangible; mostly they come in a reasonably short time.

But what about the people who work their whole lives teaching Sunday school, or with boys and girls in sports teams or Scouts or 4H, or who serve on Committees or Boards, who never see any results from what they do. Many of them just get flack for not doing enough, or for making poor decisions. It's one thing to keep working when there is affirmation and praise. It's easier to keep working when you see lives changed and people living more effectively as a result of the things you do. It is something else when you can see nothing.

On the other hand, all the examples required time and faith for them to come to fruition. You won't catch anything without going fishing, nor do you get bread without using yeast. Every act can have impact, right then. That's the reward.

You have come to this house of worship or have logged on to the livestream to be engaged in song, prayer, quiet listening, and reflecting on words from a holy book about God. You have come to be together with other people who are at least "curious" and at most "strongly committed." What is its value to you? You are introduced to a new reality, a reality different from what you have experienced throughout most of the week. There are words directing you to an invisible yet strongly known force in the universe.

Most of the week we deal with some apparently concrete realities: groceries, family fights, income and bills, plumbing and light bulbs, work and rest. Now you hear of Spirit, love, forgiveness, grace, judgement, God. What is the value of such invisible realities to you?

Compare and contrast the value of this experience with other experiences you might have had in the past and long for now: a skiing trip, the movie theater, catching up with work, boating, camping, fishing. Those are but some of the events and activities begging for our attention on the weekend. All of them are good and capable of offering some degree of rest, relaxation, and the renewal of the soul.

There is so much to choose from in our quest to experience peace with God. It is a basic premise of the faith that our hearts are indeed restless and longing for some kind of awareness of, or experience, with God. We express that restlessness in a variety of ways. Sometimes we deliberately search for connection with God and experiment with various thoughts, and sometimes in the quiet places of our hearts, we seek to give expression to those feelings.

What are the hungers of your heart? Are you seeking some healing salve for your inner hurts? For so many there is loneliness, the extended pain of grief over past losses and tragedies, hopes shattered, dreams that never happened and now are lost, hurts that are kept in a box on a shelf in the closet or under the bed.

Some never let go of past hurts – pain inflicted on them purposefully or accidentally by friends and family, disappointments of all kinds. They nurse their pain, almost savoring their broodings, seeming to rid themselves of their destructive power but never really being able to let go. There are so many ways to live in misery.

“There is a way to God,” Jesus says, “and I am the way. And I am here.” . . . Where Jesus’ stories and teachings are read and told, where the bread and the cup are shared, where people talk about Him, and where people live in a unique relationship with Him – treasuring His life and even communing with Him through the wonderful gift of prayer – there He is.

The kingdom He talked about in the stories He told is real. It’s not so much a place – a specific geographic location – as it is a way of life experienced within individuals and communities who know that God is real. And it is found in places like this, here and now, and in the homes where people are worshipping now or will at another time. That’s where God is. That was Jesus’ message.

It’s in a book. It’s in this building. It’s in the homes where two or three are gathered. It’s in these relationships. It’s in the meetings in this Congregation. It’s in Jesus. It’s in the purpose and reasons for the existence for a Christian Congregation like this.

What is heaven like? “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field.” “The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field.” [T]he Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls . . .”

This Church and all you who are part of it by your presence in this worship service have the opportunity to be the mustard seed. You have the opportunity to be yeast. You have the opportunity to be the treasure hidden in a field. You have the opportunity to be a merchant on the lookout. You are both the seeker and the treasure. Heaven is begun, but not quite here yet. Heaven becomes real as we keep on going and stay on the journey and as we help others on theirs.