

Psalm 119:129-136

Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your custom toward those who love your name.

Keep my steps steady according to your promise, and never let iniquity have dominion over me.

Redeem me from human oppression, that I may keep your precepts.

Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes.

My eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not kept.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes."

And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Today's message is called "Humble Beginnings."

July 26, 2020 - Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs

Pastor Ben Daggett

"There was a man who had fretted for fifteen years over his work. He had built his business from nothing into a rather sizable operation. In fact, he had a large plant that covered several acres. With growth and success, however, came ever-increasing demands. Each new day brought a whole new list of responsibilities. Weary of the worry, the stress, and the fear, he finally decided to give it *all* over to God. With a smile of quiet contentment, he prayed, "Lord God, the business is Yours. All the worry, the stress, and the fears I release to You and Your sovereign will. From this day forward, Lord, You own this business." That night he went to bed earlier than he had since he started the business. Finally . . . peace.

In the middle of the night the shrill ring of the phone awoke the man. The caller, in a panicked voice, yelled, "Fire! The entire place is going up in smoke!" The man calmly dressed, got into his car and drove to the plant. With his hands in his pockets he stood there and watched, smiling slightly. One of his employees hurried to his side and said, "What in the world are you smiling about? How can you be so calm? Everything's on fire!" The man answered, 'Yesterday afternoon I gave this business to God. I told him it was His. If He wants to burn it up, that's His business.'"¹

Was this man crazy? Or can he teach us something from his response, from his simple trust?

Our reading for today presents six short vignettes about the Kingdom of heaven, where Jesus explains the ways and workings of this Kingdom

¹ From *Laugh Again, Experience Outrageous Joy*; Charles R. Swindoll; 1992

through parables, as he often does in the Scriptures. Parables are short picture stories that Jesus frequently used in his teaching to convey truths about God and our relationship to God. The stories of the parables did not literally happen, but convey in a practical and simple way, from everyday life, the movements of God and spiritual truths at work in the world among human beings in relationship with God.

It's worth noting that Matthew uses the phrase "Kingdom of heaven" since his is a mostly Jewish audience, while the other Gospel writers use "Kingdom of God." Jews were (and still are) careful not to write out the name of God out of a belief that doing so would dishonor God, who is Spirit. Kingdom of heaven is analogous to Kingdom of God.

One commentator,² David Wenham, argues that "revolution of God" might help us to convey the urgency and impact of Jesus' announcement of the coming Kingdom. Jews in 1st century Palestine had suffered for centuries under violent and oppressive foreign powers or those powers' vassal kings, and they longed for the day when the coming Messiah would finally enter the scene to vanquish the hated invaders, freeing the Jews and bringing the long-awaited and painfully delayed Reign of God on earth. Throughout the Old Testament we read of how the prophets and Psalmists believed that God always had reigned on earth, from the beginning of creation, and yet their lived reality made it clear that God wasn't "exerting his rule in a total sense." (p 21) Wenham writes, "[Jesus] was in fact announcing God's final intervention in history."

But Jesus' announcement of what we might call the Revolution of God was not limited to the political and social realms. Jesus' revolution was far greater, bringing with it a final indictment of evil, the vanquishing of Satan and all the demons to bring heaven and earth back into harmony, healing the hearts of women and men estranged from God and from one another. Jesus' ultimate victory would not be through force, through armed struggle

² *The Parables of Jesus*, David Wenham; 1989

and violence, as was (and is) the way of every earthly kingdom, but through his own suffering and death, a truth which we might struggle with, and which the disciples certainly did. The announcement of and participation in Jesus' kingdom meant the healing of disease: the blind could see, the deaf could hear, and the dead were raised to life. But Jesus' revolution also impacted people's relationships with one another - where Jew and Gentile, man and woman, rich and poor found historical and social barriers dismantled and discarded in the light of Jesus' radical, transformative message of healing and grace. Jesus' message of grace transcends religious and social distinctions, calling human beings to relate to one another in obedience to the law of love, to rest in mercy and relational peace that we could never earn and certainly do not deserve. This love, God's love, is powerfully personal, and once we are impacted by it, it is impossible to contain, and must be shared. God's perfect love is sublime, a treasure to be valued above all else on this earth, and worth leaving everything else to acquire.

Each of the parables from this section is drawn from daily and ordinary, routine tasks of either work or home life, and Jesus' hearers instantly understood the references here from their own lives. God's kingdom truly saturates our lives, if we seek to immerse ourselves in it, and more often than not, the extraordinary things of God make themselves known in the ordinary and mundane tasks of the everyday. While this quick survey is no substitute for your own quiet contemplation and prayer, and is by no means exhaustive, let us now explore each of the parables from this section in turn, with help from Barclay's commentary.³ I expect to finish sometime tonight.

Parable of the mustard seed. The mustard seed is among the smallest of seeds, and yet it grows into a large shrub or small tree. The Kingdom of God will have small beginnings, but will grow into something much larger,

³ *The Daily Study Bible Series, The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 2 Revised Edition;* William Barclay; 1975

that serves a greater purpose. The birds resting in the tree's branches recall Ezekiel 31:6:

All the birds of the air
 made their nests in its boughs;
under its branches all the animals of the field
 gave birth to their young;
and in its shade
 all great nations lived.

From small beginnings, the Revolution of God would expand out to all the nations of the earth.⁴ It is clear that Jesus' life and reconciling word has been the single most influential in earth's history, and people of nearly every nation and tribe have come to embrace his teaching and way of life, aspiring to follow him in word and deed. He was poor, humble, and came from a remote outpost among subjugated people in the Roman empire, and yet here we are today, 2000 years later, still inspired and challenged, called to an entirely new way of being through his life and example, by his love and grace. We might also remember Jesus' saying that God remembers and feeds the sparrow, so He will also remember and take care of you.

Parable of the leaven. Jesus no doubt watched his own mother prepare bread this way, where a small amount of fermented bread was added to a much larger amount of dough, transforming the whole of it, and giving it a soft, spongy texture very different from the dry, brittle sheets of unleavened bread. The Good News of Jesus transforms those whose lives it touches indelibly, whereby the "function and power of Christ is to make bad men [and bad women] good." The transformation in and of Christ begins with individuals' lives.⁵ It's also remarkable to note here that Jesus so readily incorporates a teaching from the home, and that it is a woman preparing

⁴ Ibid. pg 76

⁵ Ibid, pg 79-80

the bread, considering how much of religious life in that day was relegated to the domain of men, to the exclusion of women.

Parable of the hidden treasure. The man who finds this treasure is hard at work, digging deeply to be able to find something so well hidden. He is not actively seeking the treasure, but it finds him, as it were, and he abandons everything else to obtain it. Palestine was a place of perpetual warfare, and the safest place to store valuables in a land so plagued with violence and strife was to bury it in the ground, with the hope of returning to the spot at a later date to recover, after marauding armies had come and gone.⁶

Story about the brick and PRAY/RAY. A pastor friend of mine had an experience of counseling a middle-aged construction worker who had sought his advice and listening ear. The man, whose name was Ray, was feeling very distant from God, uncertain about whether God even cared about his situation, and very uncertain about yielding himself and the situation to God. The two talked for a long time, and my friend prayed with him, asking God to show up in a personal and powerful way in Ray's life. Ray's construction work involved demolition, and later that day, he went to a site that he had been contracted to clear. As he was working among the debris, he saw something that stopped him in his tracks, and which immediately brought my pastor friend's prayer to his mind. There in the rubble were two bricks, and kicking the debris away and clearing them off, he saw that each of the bricks had the word "PRAY" inscribed on it. In all his years of demolition work he had never seen a brick so inscribed, let alone two. He stared at them, hardly believing his eyes. Crouching down, Ray picked one of the bricks up to examine it more closely. As he did, the brick split into two pieces along a crack that he hadn't seen, and the remaining piece in his hand held the word, his name, "RAY." Needless to say, Ray's heart was wrenching in two much like the brick had been, and he knew in his spirit that God had spoken directly to him. While his circumstances had not changed in any notable way in the very instant, he

⁶ *Ibid*, pg 84

knew that he knew that he knew that God had heard his prayers, and was invested in his life, personally. He embraced salvation in Christ shortly thereafter. Ray had found the buried treasure, or that treasure had found him, and his life would never be the same!

Parable of the pearl of great price. In this parable, the subject of the story is a merchant. He *is* actively seeking the pearl, and once he finds it he sells all else to obtain it. The pearl was highly regarded in the ancient world, as it is today, and admired universally for its beauty and grace.⁷

The parable of the dragnet is similar to that of the weeds and the tares, which we read last week. The Kingdom of God takes up all kinds of folks in its net, both the good and the bad, the undesirable and ugly, and those who have got it all together. The sorting out and judgment comes later, and since we are not God, we trust in God and his angels to do that work. The Church is a place of unabashed and unconditional love, accepting of all who are embraced in its net, and certainly a mix of personalities and characters. Some are honest and sincere, and some are not. There are wolves in sheeps' clothing, as Jesus warns elsewhere, and among the sheep there are goats who profess to honor God but who "never knew him." The warning at the close reminds us that we must be ever mindful that we all will give an account for our lives as individuals before our Creator God, for good or for ill.⁸

Our last parable of this section, the master of the household, teaches that upon receiving and embracing the Kingdom of God, those newly transformed will put the old skills, gifts and graces to use in new ways, as God leads and instructs them in their lives, now dedicated to serving in His name.⁹

⁷ *Ibid*, pg 87

⁸ *Ibid*, pg 89-90

⁹ *Ibid*, pg 90-91

Are you baking more bread during the pandemic? Why not take a cue from the woman of the parable and bake an extra loaf (three measures was a lot of flour!) and bring it to someone you know who is lonely or isolated? If bread isn't your thing, why don't you pick up the phone and call that friend you haven't seen in a few months? It's been an isolating time, and while that may be a blessing to some of you, to others it has been very hard. I look forward to the day when I can see you all face to face, but for now, trust that you are in my prayers, and that your prayers for my family and me are bearing fruit. Just yesterday, while writing out this message, I saw a little green pot on my new desk at the Hope Center in Salem. I said, "I think Milka would like that." That color green is her favorite. I took a picture of the pot and sent it to her through a text message, asking if she wanted it. A short time later I heard back from her, saying that just before she had received my message, she had been thinking that she would like a plant for her office space in the parsonage. You may call that coincidence. I call that answered prayer, and God's gracious act of touching our hearts in that powerfully personal way that disarms and renews us each day, secure in our knowledge that we are not alone on this journey, and that God is with us at every step. It is in the ordinary, daily work, it's in the small things that seem insignificant but actually are so valuable, that the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus' revolution, becomes manifest.

My hope and prayer for you, as we close, is that God's Holy Spirit will touch your life in a powerful and personal way, to remind you, beloved, that you belong to God and that you are the Pearl of Great Price in God's eyes. Jesus, after all, gave everything he had, his very life, to buy you back again. Through him you and I have access to the throne of grace, and so can go before God with all boldness to confess our fears, our struggles, our perceived inadequacies and shortcomings, our sin and failure, and be renewed, restored, rejuvenated and regenerated to the glory of God and for the sake of the revolution that Jesus began those years ago. Humble beginnings.