

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

19th Sunday of Quarantine (20th overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

I Kings 3:5-12

Psalm 119:129-136

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

07/26/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

31[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;32it 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." 33He 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." 44"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. 45"Again, the kingdom of heaven is

like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52And 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

God’s Good Kin(g)dom

Good morning! We have a lot of ground to cover today, so no funny jokes or embarrassing stories from my past. Instead, we jump right in! In the past few weeks we have tip-toed carefully through the parables of the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The lectionary has carefully curated

the texts, giving us the original parable that Jesus taught to the crowds followed up by the private explanation that is given to the disciples after they ask for clarity. It's been nice and neat; one parable, and one explanation. Today's reading is a little different. Well, actually it's a lot different. It's like drinking from a firehose. It reminds me of the days in seminary and college where I was most challenged. You get a sense that something deep and insightful is being shown to you, and you're just trying to hold on as it washes over. I would imagine that this large collection of lessons is probably more realistic to a long teaching session with a traveling Rabbi. So we've gone from one parable and explanation at a time to five or six (depending on how you count it) parables at once with no explanation! My plan today is to give a quick overview and explanation of the parables and then move on to what we should do with our new understanding! And so, because, as Douglas R.A. Hare points out, every parable has a sense of something hidden that needs revealed, let's dive in!

We begin with another parable based on vegetation. The parable of the mustard seed is one of the most well known of all the Biblical texts. If you have spent some time in the church, you have probably heard it. This can sometimes mean that we're quick to dismiss the text because we're so used to it, but I'm begging you to look again! Jesus says that the mustard

seed is the smallest of all the seeds, but grows into a tree. It's certainly a tiny seed, but not the absolute smallest. But what would have really confused the crowd is that a mustard seed doesn't grow into a tree. Fr. Daniel J. Harrington points out that it would be better to call it a large bush. *"A mustard bush/tree could reach a height of from eight to twelve feet."* Eugene Boring, a scholar with one of the most unfortunate names I've ever heard, is less generous. He writes that *"to understand this parable, one must first recognize that a mustard plant is an annual herb, whose proverbially small seeds can indeed produce a plant normally from two to six feet in height. (in extraordinary cases, nine to ten feet), but does not produce a tree of any kind."* But why call it a tree then? I'm glad you asked! Boring continues, *"The 'tree' motif comes not from observation of mustard seeds and plants, but reflects the symbol of the imperial tree found in representation of empires, including apocalyptic imagery of the coming of the kingdom of God."* So it's less about a seed that becomes a tree and more about something unassuming that becomes the ruling power.

The second parable is the rather straight-forward story of how yeast allows a small amount of flour to grow into something large and wonderful. What surprised me is that this isn't a "small" amount of flour. The parable harkens back to the Genesis story where Sarai prepares three measures of

flour for heavenly guests. This was enough flour to prepare enough bread for 100-150 people! My man Douglas R.A. Hare writes that *“The mustard seed and leaven are sometimes treated as parables of growth. They do indeed speak of growth, but the emphasis appears to lie rather on the sharp contrast between the initial and final stages in each case. That is, neither parable is intended to encourage the church to regard itself as gradually growing and becoming more powerful within the world, or as “leavening” the world. Both proclaim that God’s action in the world, while almost imperceptible or hidden, is nonetheless real and will in God’s own time come to full fruition.”* Remember, always make sure that God is the subject of the active verb! The story isn’t about the church, about us! It’s about God! Hare continues, *“Both assume that the kingdom of God is not a strictly future reality that will suddenly appear full-blown without any prior activity. In Jesus’ ministry the kingdom has been mysteriously inaugurated.”*

From these first two parables we jump ahead to another grouping in verses 44-52. The first two seem to fit together, as do this second grouping. First we have the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. It can sound a little strange to us at first, but we need to remember that people didn’t have bank accounts or credit cards. One didn’t have a safety deposit box to store

one's valuables. So the most common practice was to bury it somewhere hidden. Fr. Harrington points out that *“Political conditions in Palestine and the continuing threat of invasion made the burial of one’s valuables a common way of protecting them. The implication here seems to be that the present owner had no knowledge of what was hidden in the field.”* So, if the Roman soldiers might show up and ransack your stuff, it was probably a good idea to put it somewhere hidden!

The second parable in this grouping is a little more easy to follow. A merchant sells EVERYTHING they have in order to afford the finest pearl ever found. Both of these parables seem to go against practical financial advice, but that’s because the point here isn’t on what was sold or lost, but on the great value of what is instead found!

Our final parable is about fishing. And, as I have discussed before, I hate fishing, so it’s not one I feel especially drawn towards, but what I DO know is that we’re talking about what would have been commercial fishing, not the relax on the shore and enjoy a beer type, but the large scale operation that one would undertake to provide a way of life. It would be a waste of time and money to try and sort the fish as they were caught in the moment, so the easier thing to do is to sort them out at the end of the day on the shore.

I really enjoy today's text. The mustard seed story is especially interesting. It's a turning upside down of what the world might expect. Where rulers and nations, from Babylon to Rome would use the image of a giant and tall tree to convey the power and strength of their empires, God's Kin(g)dom is nothing but a bush or shrub. But don't overlook the power of that bush! Take a walk in the woods and you'll notice that for every tall tree you find, they're surrounded by shrubs and bushes that provide shelter to a whole host of life!

It's a scary world right now. And while we cannot downplay the danger that exists for all of us, the stories today remind us that God has been at work ushering in God's Kin(g)dom for over two thousand years, and God isn't done yet! As St. Paul said: *"38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Amen.