

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
July 24, 2011
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
"Have You Understood All This?"
Pastor John Guthrie

Early on in their marriage, Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip were crossing the water to Vancouver Island in Canada. The weather was unsettled and the ship was rocking violently. Just as a young petty officer arrived in the royal suite, the ship lurched and the tray of tea cakes he was holding fell to the floor. Surprisingly, Philip dropped to his hands and knees and helped the petty officer to gather them up. After retrieving a handful of cakes he returned to his seat, turned to Elizabeth and remarked, "I've got mine--yours are all down there."

Today I want to explore with you what this thing is, this kingdom of heaven. You have heard me say any number of times that it is never to be confused with heaven, for it is not. For good measure, allow me to say it one more time: The kingdom of heaven is not heaven. Heaven, in our understanding, is that place opened to us after death by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is something entirely different, as these five similes make very clear. The kingdom of heaven is already present among us, but not yet complete.

So if the kingdom of heaven is not heaven, then what is it? Here's an interesting fact: the term "kingdom of heaven" appears in Matthew's gospel a total of 23 times. One of those times is chapter 3, verse 2, in which Jesus says to his followers, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He says identically the same thing in chapter 4, verse 17. The context of those two passages makes is very clear that in Jesus himself, the kingdom has come near. The key to understanding the kingdom is to know Jesus the Messiah.

Let's take a close look at the five very brief parables contained in today's reading. They can be categorized into three groups: two of them illustrate the pervasive, explosive power of the kingdom in the world that we occupy. Two of them present the immense value of the kingdom. One of them reminds us that the kingdom is not reserved for everyone, the same lesson we saw very briefly in last Sunday's Matthew reading on the weeds that grow up among the wheat. We'll take a look at all of these themes in order.

First, Jesus says, the kingdom is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows up it becomes like a tree. Even the birds come and nest in its branches. Some commentators think Jesus was referring to the black mustard plant, which would grow as tall as nine feet. Regardless, the idea is that the kingdom is like something that begins very small and becomes very great.

This mustard plant parable is one of my favorites for this reason: I believe that little kingdom mustard plants are constantly popping up around us. One of our responsibilities as individuals and as the Community Presbyterian Church is to be watching for those little mustard plants, because that is where the triune God is at work. Then, it is incumbent on you and me and all of us together to water and nurture those little seedlings, to become mustard plant gardeners. Really. The whole idea behind being a "missional church" is to be on the lookout for the places where God is already at work, and then to join in. We are to be caring for little mustard plants.

Again, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixes in with flour, until all of the flour is leavened. You probably know that yeast is denigrated in many biblical passages, but not here: here Jesus uses yeast as that which gives bread fullness and flavor. A little yeast can leaven the whole loaf. Thus the kingdom of heaven need not be overpowering or overbearing. Instead, it can spread in the lives of individuals and in congregations of Christ-followers. I can guarantee you that I pray with regularity that the yeast of the kingdom permeates and transforms Community Presbyterian Church, so that we can offer the bread of life to our community and the world.

In the next two parables of Matthew chapter 13, Jesus changes the picture he is painting, telling his listeners and us what the kingdom is like. In verses 44 through 46, we are to understand that the kingdom is of great value. It is like a treasure hidden in a field, such that, when a person finds it, in his great joy he goes and sells everything that he has, and buys that field. Or, it is like a merchant constantly searching for fine pearls who finds one whose value is immeasurable; he goes and sells all that he has and buys that one priceless pearl.

You and I, and all of us together are to be “sold out.” We are to be willing to sell all that we have for the joy and hope of the kingdom of heaven, which is priceless. So how are we doing? Is the kingdom simply a pie-in-the-sky illusion to us? Do we think Jesus is simply rambling on about nothing? Do you think I am simply rambling on about nothing? Are you and I willing to spend the time it takes to discover what this kingdom really is all about, and are we willing to risk everything for it?

What would you go and sell everything that you have in order to buy? Is belonging heart, soul, mind, and strength to Jesus Christ on that list? And what does that belonging look like for you? What things do you and I place above our commitment to Jesus of Nazareth? And what kind of contortions do you and I go through in order to justify our warped sense of value? And what are you and I going to do about it? If we don't value the kingdom of heaven above all other things...why not?

Finally there is the parable of the net that is thrown into the sea, bringing out fish of all kinds. The fishermen then sit down and put the good fish into baskets but throw the bad fish out on the land. So it will be, Jesus says, at the end of the age, when angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous. The evil ones will be thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and teeth-gnashing. As noted earlier, this parable parallels the one we heard last week, in which Jesus says the kingdom is like weeds that grow up among the wheat. At harvest time, the weeds are separated from the wheat; gathered up and thrown into the furnace of fire, where (you guessed it) there will be more weeping and teeth-gnashing.

The lesson is repeated twice in chapter 13: the kingdom is not reserved for everyone. This rejection of universal salvation is found again and again in Matthew's gospel. Matthew understands that Jesus is calling us to make a decision, and more than a decision, to become totally sold-out followers, placing devotion to Jesus Christ above all other things. Failure to trust in Christ, failure to pick up our crosses and follow him, failure to place him even above our families, those failures have consequences. Do we believe this? Or is it so much religious babble? If we do believe it, is there evidence? If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? The same question goes for me.

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks. “Have you understood all this?” The disciples answer, “Yes.” I really doubt it. These are the ones who desert him on Calvary. These are the ones who despair when he is crucified, rather than trusting in what he told them would happen

afterwards. And you and I are no different. Jesus asks us, "Have you understood all this?" And we reply, "Yes." But not really.

Jesus himself exemplifies what the kingdom of heaven is like. How does he do that? Well, he does things like washing the feet of his disciples; see John's gospel, chapter 13. In Matthew chapter 18, when the disciples come to Jesus asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus sets a child among them and tells them, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom."

So the kingdom is not about greatness, and it's not about power, or influence: it's about being like a little child. Remember: child-like, not child-ish.

One of the predecessor Presbyterian denominations of our own denomination adopted in 1910 what that it called "The Great Ends of the Church." These Great Ends (or Purposes) define a kind of mission statement for the church, as understood by a group of Presbyterians, now over 100 years ago. Even after that period of time, the six Great Ends of the Church still ring true as our calling as sold-out followers of Christ Jesus. Here they are, for your consideration: The Great Ends of the Church are

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
2. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
3. The maintenance of divine worship
4. The preservation of the truth
5. The promotion of social righteousness
6. The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

Note carefully the last one: the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. The implicit assumption is that the Kingdom may not at least always be obvious, and that we are summoned to make it obvious.

In other words, we are summoned by Christ to be witnesses to the kingdom of heaven. One scholar has written it this way: "The message that Jesus Christ is the present and coming Lord is to be witnessed to in every aspect of the church's life before and for the sake of the world, as we wait for God to complete the work of reconciliation and healing that God initiated on the cross and at Easter."¹

You are witnesses to the kingdom when you carry out exhausting rummage sales and donate the majority of the proceeds to worthy causes in our neighborhood and the world. You are witnesses to the kingdom when you run up the mountain, cut firewood, bring it down, split it, and sell it to supplement our mission budget, or give it away to those in need. You are witnesses to the kingdom in your support of our mission co-workers to Brazil, Josh and Kim Vis. You are witnesses to the kingdom when you engage in mission trips to Mexico, New Orleans, Honduras, San Diego, and the Dominican Republic. You are witnesses to the kingdom when you support children in developing nations through Compassion International. You are witnesses to the kingdom when you volunteer to make lunches for children in need over the summer months, when you make lunches for Utah Summer Games volunteers, when you donate goods to Iron County Care and Share, and hygiene items for the most recent CPW mission project.

¹ Darrel L. Guder, *Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World*, Witherspoon Press, Louisville, KY; 2007.

You also exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world when you simply love one another. Really. Perhaps one of the most important ways we carry out that exhibition: simply by loving one another in word and deed, in the same way that Christ has loved and continues to love us.

The kingdom of heaven is among you, Jesus says in Luke 17: 21. It pops up in the most surprising places, like mustard seeds. It spreads and adds flavor to the mission of the church, like yeast. It is valuable beyond our ability to value, like treasure and the finest pearl. It demands devotion, dedication, conviction, and sacrifice. It is here already present, but not yet completed.

Have you understood all this?