

The Rev. Erin Hensley
July 24, 2011, Propers 12, Year A
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

For Heaven's Sake

When we think of heaven, we usually go out of this world. Our minds and hearts go to a place away far away from here, to a city in the clouds that shimmers with the sun, to St. Peter at the pearly gates waiting to welcome people to their true homes. Rays of sun bounce off the long, white robes of those who walk in the heavenly city. And the grandiose mansions of the Lord stretch across the sky for miles and miles. Heaven is a distant land and in that place all is well.

We know in this world all is not well. We hurt ourselves; we hurt our neighbors both near and far; we hurt the rest of God's creation. We drink ourselves to death and schedule ourselves to pieces. Nutritious food is expensive and processed food is cheap. Work that pays a living wage, even a job with pay, is increasingly hard to find.

But not all is wrong in this world. Grace wins. Grace has won. If we only open our eyes, hearts, and minds, we will see glimpses of heaven, that great kingdom, the in here and the now. Glimpses of heaven exist when parents and children sit at the kitchen table, say grace, and talk with one another instead of watching television. Heaven's here when adults in a boardroom try to understand each other more than trying to be understood, when a person calls her neighbor to find out the test results, when cooks tear off the non-greasy tops of pizza boxes to recycle them. Heaven's here when spouses or partners have a monthly date night so they don't forget who the other person is, when friends cook a meal for a neighbor who came home from the hospital, when a fifteen year old asks for people to donate items to the mission instead of giving her presents for her birthday. We see heaven when people spend four hours on a Saturday morning to make beds in the men's shelter, mop the dining room floor, and then eat lunch alongside candidates in the recovery program.

One may think such actions are too mundane or too small to constitute anything divine. But listen carefully to today's parables: "*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...*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*... *the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls*...*the kingdom of heaven is like a net* that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind."¹ Jesus does not compare the kingdom of heaven to otherworldly things. Instead, again and again, he compares the kingdom of heaven to what happens in the minutia of the everyday world. Barbara Brown Taylor poignantly poses an important question about Jesus' parables: "Why else would he talk about heaven in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and merchants buying and selling

¹ Italics added for emphasis.

things and fisherman sorting fish, unless he meant somehow to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map but that 'X' marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities in our lives."²

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need not search far and wide for heaven, for the kingdom of heaven is already here, in part. Let's remember, too, that the gospel according to Matthew was first shared with a predominantly Jewish audience. In this tradition, the name of God is so holy that one does not say the name aloud, so Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of the God." Doing so is his way of respecting the first audience. You see, Jesus' "kingdom of heaven" parables in Matthew and Jesus' "kingdom of God" parables in Mark and Luke refer to the same place and time, where and when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

When we love ourselves, when we love our neighbors as ourselves, when we care for God's creation, we participate in the continual unfolding of heaven. You may be thinking "I really don't want that responsibility. It sounds too big. I might fail." But all of the small actions done in great love add up. Our God is a God of the extraordinary in the ordinary. And the truth is you are already participating in this great adventure with God. As one of your priests, I am blessed to see your ministries both in and outside of parish walls. You write notes of care to those who grieve, you make meals for those who are sick, and you try to be the best parents or grandparents you can be. You operate businesses, you work with colleagues so that profits aren't the top priority. You attend worship, you lifted loved ones and enemies in prayer. You cook with others for brothers and sisters and Christ who worship during the Gathering service. You listen to the struggle of those who can't pay rent or their light bill. You see, you are already bound up in the continued work of God.

Some people are excited about going to heaven and there's nothing wrong with such enthusiasm in and of itself. I do long for a place and a time when we will study war no more. I long to see those I love but see no longer. I long for the day when no one experiences pain and crying is no more. But as far as I know, now is not my time to die. Today is not that day. And as long as you and I are living, for heaven's sake, now is the time and this earthly home is the place to love. *Amen.*

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 44.