

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**30 July 2023**

**Matthew 13:31-33,44-52**

Usually the orthodox rabbis of Europe boasted distinguished rabbinical genealogies, but Rabbi Yechiel of Ostrowce was an exception. He was the son of a simple baker and he inherited some of the forthright qualities of a man of the people. Once, when a number of rabbis had gathered at some festivity, each began to boast of his eminent rabbinical ancestors. When Rabbi Yechiel's turn came, he replied gravely, "In my family, I'm the first eminent ancestor." His colleagues were shocked by this piece of impudence, but said nothing. Immediately after, the rabbis began to expound Torah. Each one was asked to hold forth on a text culled from the sayings of one of his distinguished rabbinical ancestors. One after another the rabbis delivered their learned dissertations. At last it came time for Rabbi Yechiel to say something. He arose and said, "My masters, my father was a baker. He taught me that only fresh bread was appetizing and that I must avoid the stale. This can also apply to learning." And with that Rabbi Yechiel sat down."  
(Ausubel, *A Treasure of Jewish Folklore*, 51]

Last week we reviewed the second parable of Chapter 13. We said how the parables of Matthew 13 answer the questions of Chapter 12. The first question left by Chapter 12 is why is there opposition to Jesus. But there is another question left by Chapter 12. The opposition against Jesus is related to his association with the outcast and what he does for them. If these actions illustrate (or show to everyone) what the Kingdom of God looks like, then we must ask, what exactly is the Kingdom of God? The six parables given in our text today seek to answer the question, "What is the kingdom of God?" Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Then he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Then, "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." Then "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." Then, "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." And finally, "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."

For the sake of brevity, I will only cover the first two and the last of these six parables, but if you ever consider allowing me to preach for 45 minutes, I might do the whole passage some justice. I believe the first two parables have the same theme, a theme that is closely related to the theme of the last parable.

In the first parable, we talk about mustard seeds planted in the field. Matthew's "in the field" is too general, I believe Luke's "in the garden" is closer to the meaning intended by Jesus. Anyone familiar with Leviticus would have been shocked. Leviticus 19:19 says, "You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." This is called the "diverse kinds" rule. Jews are not allowed to plant two different types of seeds in the same field, or mustard seeds in their gardens. The idea is to prevent uncleanness. No Jew can mix in his garden that which should not be mixed. By planting these small seeds, the Jewish farmer has contaminated his garden and violated the Law. There is also a problem with the language of the text. The mustard seed is not the smallest seed in Palestine, and it never grows into a tree, but rather into a large bush. Matthew is writing a story and not a book on science, but the comparing of the Kingdom to an insignificant bush is rather telling. Jesus uses an image of the mustard bush sheltering birds in its branches. This is a well-known image for Israel. Ezekiel and Daniel tell us that God will plant Israel as a noble tree. "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind" (Ezekiel 17:23.) But in these cases, the author is talking about the majestic Cedar trees, not an invasive shrub. I don't believe this is a mistake, however. Matthew means something very specific here, to which we will get in a minute.

The second parable is just as problematic. The Kingdom of God is like an item most Jews avoid and consider unclean. In fact, this item was specifically rejected by God on the day of Passover in Egypt. The bread eaten by Israel had to be unleavened bread. This, in a way, is the bread of God's covenant with his people. Every major Jewish celebration uses the unleavened bread of Exile. Why is leaven so rejected? Because it is the result of an unclean process. "Leaven in the ancient world was a symbol for corruption... Leaven is made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold forms. The bread rots and decays, unlike modern bread yeast... In Israel there is an equation that leaven is the unholy every day, and unleavened the holy, the sacred, the feast." (Scott, *Hear Then The Parable*, 387. As quoted by Crossmarks.com). Why wouldn't Jesus tell a parable about the Kingdom being like the beloved unleavened bread? I believe Jesus is pointing to something sacred here.

Both of these parables are pointing to the same reality. The Kingdom of God can be found in the most unlikely of places. The Pharisees and the Scribes in the original audience and us in this audience often make distinctions between what we consider holy and unholy, proper and improper, clean and unclean, worthy of value and unworthy of value, but both of these stories challenge those understandings. In this way, these two parables connect to the theme of last week. We want to be the ones who separate the wheat from the tares and the bad fish from the good fish, but this is not our job. Likewise, we want to ascribe value to people who do the things we value, but it is entirely possible

that the kingdom can be found in those people for whom we have no use. In Matthew, “The kingdom is associated with uncleanness just as Jesus himself associates with the unclean, and the outcast.” (Stofregen, Crossmarks.com.) These parables challenge our attempts to predict where the kingdom of God can be found. God has the freedom to allow his Kingdom to appear even in symbols and people we consider uncleansed and unworthy. This fits within Mathew’s theology. Remember the Beatitudes, “The poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness receive the Kingdom of God.” (Mat. 5:3; 5:10). In Mat. 19:14, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Elsewhere, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and all things will be given to you,” (Mat. 6:33).

Let us briefly talk about the last Parable. Jesus said that the Scholar of the Kingdom brings from his treasury both what is old and what is new. In other words, Jesus is challenging his hearers and us not to become fixed on old treasures, old wisdom, old traditions, but to allow themselves the gift of new wine. Old wine, as in Torah, Tradition, the Teachings of the Fathers, even Scripture without a lively application to current, modern, life becomes not the living faith of the Church, but the faith of dead people. On the other hand, basing ourselves completely on the new truths of our day, without the deep roots of Scripture and our Tradition devolves into fads that don’t last and will never have the power to save. Jesus is asking his hearers not to become so shocked by his teachings that they will dismiss them altogether. Not to become so scandalized by his radical inclusion of the outcast that they forget that Scripture in general, and Torah in particular, was also given to sinners, at a time when they needed God the most. The so-called uncleaned and sinners with whom Jesus associates are citizens of the new kingdom. The scribe of the Kingdom uses both old and new treasures to advance the kingdom. We are called to be wise scribes. To apply old truths to new circumstances, and to see ourselves as humble bushes and leavened bread through whom God’s Kingdom is shown to the world. We are ambassadors of God’s Kingdom, the very place and time where people live in accordance with God’s peace, love, and justice. What this means is that we are instruments of God’s redeeming love for humanity. This is much more than a theory or a pie-in-the-sky theology. The kingdom is anywhere the will of God is obeyed and his glory is revealed. Today, the passage from Matthew invites us to see God’s Kingdom in the humble, common, uneventful events and situations of our life. It may just be that the kingdom is hiding in people we have rejected. I pray today, we will reconsider how we view the world, and how we understand God’s presence among us. Amen!