

## Pentecost 8 2020 Devotional

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I Kings 3:15-12 Romans 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

#### The Kingdom of Heaven is like....

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how something so small that it is invisible to the eye can grow rapidly and exponentially into a destructive force that consumes all our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, nations, and as a world.

The passage from the Bible this Sunday are a counter-image to this destructive force. The parables describe how the kingdom of heaven emerges from something almost invisible to the eye and grows exponentially, offering us sustenance, a treasure worthy of all our attention and resources.

- The parable of the mustard seed calls to mind the parable of the sower, but rather than focus on the soil or the seed, it focuses on the shrub that emerges, sturdy enough to house the nests of birds. Birds also receive God's care in Matthew 6:26: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."
- The parable of the yeast builds on the theme of God's care by anticipating the feeding of the multitudes, a story that occurs twice in Matthew (14:13-21; 15:32-39). Notably, Matthew adds that it was not just the men who were fed, but also the women and children (14:21; 15:38)—those who are often most vulnerable when food is scarce.
- The parable of the treasure hidden in the field hearkens back to Matthew 6:19-20: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." It also anticipates Jesus' words to the rich man: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (19:21). Read together with the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, we are reminded that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). This is almost too tangible for comfort. Yet we are reminded by the preceding parables that the kingdom of God does not ignore our needs; rather, God challenges our material excess acquired for self-serving purposes.
- The parable of the pearl moves us in a different direction. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus cautions the disciples, "do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." The swine may be a reference to the Romans; in any case, it is an insulting reference to those who oppose the kingdom. Like the soil on the path or the rocky ground in the parable of the sower, we are reminded that the priceless kingdom of heaven will not be welcomed by everyone.
- The parable of the yeast suggests that opposition may come even from within. The image of yeast occurs again in Matthew 16:5-12 where Jesus warns the disciples of the leaven of the religious leaders, who, with their teachings, "lock people out of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 23:13). Although we may think of the religious leaders as outsiders within the narrative, they belong to the same religious world as Jesus.

Of interest also are the diverse socioeconomic settings represented in the parables:

- a sower of seed,
- a woman baking bread,
- a fortune seeker, a merchant,
- a commercial fisher.

These reflect types of people and situations that are easily recognized in the world of the Gospel and today, each individual going about their work. The ordinariness of the tasks invites us to see signs of the kingdom of heaven in our day-to-day lives; to recognize that it is emerging in our very midst. This becomes an invitation to us to cultivate the practice of seeing God's work among us through questions:

- What do we expect to see?
- And where do we expect to find it?
- Have there been times when our expectations have been overturned?

Ponder these questions as you worship this Sunday? For such is the "Kingdom of Heaven"!

Pastor Dave Beard



