

August 6, 2023
“Kindom Training
Psalm 105:1-10 / Matthew 13:31-35, 44-52
Pastor Tim

I know I've shared before at Calvary that I have for most of my life longed to be an expert at something.

I've always admired people who are – highly skilled IN or knowledgeable ABOUT one thing or another. When I was younger, I actually struggled with the fact that I wasn't. I desperately wanted to be known for something.

I tried to come up with things where I could pursue my expertise, mostly specific subjects I could read about and study. For a long while, it was history – the Civil Rights movement in this country, for example. Or social change movements more generally. At another point in my life, it was bike repair.

Random, I know. I've been all over the place.

Anyway, it never worked. My older self has long since realized that I'm just not cut out for expertise. I'm not built for it. I have neither the memory nor the natural drive and determination for it. I dig into a new subject or potential skill and eventually peter out.

At the end of the day, 51 years and change into this life, I am what you call a generalist – competent at a range of things, expert at none. My ego is OK with that; well, mostly OK with that.

It's not about me. It's not supposed to be about me, maybe a hard lesson for all of us to realize.

The Psalmist makes that clear enough, placing our relatively momentary selves and lives in the context of the Eternal One.

Sing praises to God, make known God's wonderful works. Glory in God's name. Seek and rejoice in God's presence and strength, within the ancient and ongoing arc of God's everlasting covenant. The covenant founded on love, above all else.

It's not about us. Our presence, our expertise, our knowledge, our talents, our offerings, will come and go. God, the God of covenantal Love, will not.

So give thanks, continually, for the Divine presence within and around you. However you name and understand it.

The author of Matthew's gospel takes another approach.

Jesus is busy teaching – he, what we might call an EXPERT at Divine Love, radical, life-giving, boundary-breaking, justice-seeking love. One who, as previous texts suggest, taught as “one having authority.”

When Jesus taught, people listened.

In this case we hear a string of short, provocative parables focused on the kingdom. Jesus says, “KINGdom,” to articulate how the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is profoundly different than the kingdoms of the world. Because the people whom Jesus was teaching knew what it was to live within and under worldly kingdoms. The word meant something.

Again, we tend to use instead the word, “KINdom” at Calvary, as a way to emphasize HOW the KINdom of God, the KINdom of heaven, is different. Love is rightly directed to God as the Eternal One, as the Psalmist reminds us, but also to our neighbors, KIN, as to ourselves. The KIN-dom of God is defined by how we love each other, as ourselves.

The KINdom is here, now, AND it is coming.

This string of parables in Matthew is part of a larger discourse developed from parables found in Mark's gospel, the first gospel written. At the end of which Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?”

Have you understood all this?

The disciples say, “Yes,” they have. Maybe they have, maybe they haven't, but Jesus responds – and here we get to that other approach to expertise; Jesus responds by

inviting them, if you will, to become experts at the KINGdom of God, the KINGdom of heaven.

“Therefore every scribe (that is, every disciple) who has been trained (that is, disciplined) 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.”

Or HER treasure. Or THEIR treasure.

If you have been trained, if you have become expert, at the kingdom of heaven, your treasure will include both new and old.

And such treasure is not of this world. Remember it was Jesus who also taught not to “store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in,” but to instead store up treasures in heaven.

“For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In God’s KINGdom, there is an altogether different currency. It’s not about your stuff, it’s not about you, it’s about your heart.

Perhaps in referring to what is new and what is old Jesus is referencing the Law and the spirit of the Law – a nod to himself as one who came not to abolish the “old” Law, but to fulfill it. One who came to pour new wine into old wineskins.

Perhaps he is acknowledging the wisdom that what is new does not, and need not, necessarily replace what is old. The old simply makes space for the new – all in service to that which is life-giving and love-producing.

Our hearts, our lives, all of ours, are filled with both old and new. Either way, when we’re talking about treasure in heaven, we’re talking about that which keeps our hearts soft for love, our lives open to and turned toward love.

Nothing is more important than that. There is no KINGdom of God, no KINGdom of heaven, without it.

And because of it, the KINdom is here, and it is coming.

Now to the parables themselves. The kingdom of heaven is like ...

We know, as our reading this morning reminds us, that Jesus often taught using parables. In fact, it says with exaggerated emphasis that “without a parable he told them nothing.”

The text tells us Jesus used parables to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet. Some ancient manuscripts name the “prophet Isaiah,” but the quoted reference to Hebrew scriptures, one of 14 found in Matthew, is actually to what we know as Psalm 78, verse 2. Parables meant to proclaim “what has been hidden from the foundations of the world.”

The KINdom of heaven requires some serious digging, but Jesus isn't interested in keeping things hidden. The KINdom of heaven requires some serious soul-searching. It requires us to stop and listen for the still, small voice of God. To stop and look for the Way of Love.

The kingdoms of this world are built on the surface of things – often on that which is bigger, brighter. And dare I say it, newer.

The kingdom of heaven goes much, much deeper. And so requires us to go much, much deeper. Within and beyond ourselves. Old and new.

Parables are meant to move us beyond literalism, beyond the lazy interpretive surface of things. They are meant to make you think. Wonder. Reflect. Discuss. Learn. Grow. Stretch. Parables are meant to spark curiosity, itself a spiritual gift.

Parables don't spit out answers like a fortune-cookie fortune, but instead call to question. As one commentator puts it, a parable, like the Gospel as a whole, the good news, “taints the reality we've grown to accept, challenges the views we've lived by and again and again calls into question assumptions that have guided much of our lives in the world.”

Parables are meant to point you in the right direction if you let them percolate. They are meant to point you to a community operating with a radically different set of values than we often see and experience operating in the world around us.

On the heels of the parable of weeds among the wheat, just before our reading, we hear first the parable of the mustard seed.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in (the) 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."

This one's a classic. If we were doing this right, we'd break into groups and discuss amongst ourselves what we think it means. And report back. All the richer because of it.

But we're not gonna do that. At least not today. That's another idea for a Bible study, just looking at the parables and what they have to teach us about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love.

The mustard seed is neither the smallest of seeds nor the greatest of shrubs. And in fact, it was by all accounts considered a weed itself. Fast-spreading, invasive, unwelcome. But we know, of course, that Jesus focused much of his ministry on the otherwise unwelcome.

The point here, or at least one point here, is that in the kingdom of heaven, big things come in small packages. Good things come from places you least expect.

Just ask Zaccheus, the notably short and despised tax collector who climbed up a tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus passing by. And then sold everything he had and gave it to the poor.

Small is valued in a way that it very much is not in the kingdoms of this world, because small can pack a punch. Big change, good change, comes from small contributions. Out of the mouths of babes. From the widow's mite.

It is not about us. It's about the seeds we plant, however small. And it's about the trees or whatever we become, ultimately providing a home for the birds of the air.

This is a parable about love, about the quality of love. Love extended. Every little bit counts in the kingdom of heaven, which is why the kingdom is here, AND it is coming.

The kingdom of heaven is also like yeast, a leavening agent. As with the mustard seed, we take note that leaven in the biblical context was a sign of impurity, corruption, and kneading it into the flour irreparably tainted the loaves.

Jesus himself would say things like, "Watch out, and beware the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." Watch out for the infectiousness of their hypocrisy.

So note here again that Jesus takes the THING and turns the THING on its head. Uses what is considered a negative to illustrate a positive. Subtleties not lost on Jesus' audience.

A small amount of yeast mixed in with the flour, or "hidden in" from the original Greek. It's not much, you can't see it when it's mixed in, but it makes the bread rise and expand all the same.

And more importantly, the bread will not rise or expand without it.

The kingdom of heaven is like THAT! It's not that we are like mustard seeds or yeast; the kingdom of heaven itself is.

Within the kingdom of heaven, here and coming, the math is different. Divine Love multiplies our love exponentially, beyond our wildest imaginations. It multiplies compassion and connection and community.

It's the kind of math we see after disasters. People responding to each other, caring for each other, supporting each other, reaching out to each other, LOVING each other as neighbors. As human beings. Not as categories or labels or stereotypes.

Jesus goes on, one parable after another.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. Or a merchant in search of fine pearls.

Someone finds the treasure, hides it and then – perhaps a shade duplicitously since the landowner obviously didn't know about the treasure – joyously sells all he has so he can buy the field – and with it, receive the treasure. The merchant finds one pearl and promptly sells all they have to buy it.

Illogical at best, insanity at worst. But seen through the lens of kingdom values, and kingdom math, faithful. Seeing what others may not.

Words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians resonate: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

It's not about us. But it is about us going all in, joyfully, for the kind of treasure that multiplies exponentially. Hearts all in for love. Like the disciples called by Jesus to leave their nets and their livelihoods behind to follow him.

As that same commentator further suggests, the kingdom makes claim "on your whole life, not just part. It invades your whole world and reality and can't be contained only to your spiritual, Sunday self."

Hearts all in to know and practice love, and to work for a world where everyone and every living thing knows love. Is beloved.

For Jesus, for the prophets before and after him, that is the work of justice and peace-making. Where there is no justice, no peace, there is no love. And that is not the kingdom of heaven.

But the kingdom of heaven IS here, AND it is coming.

Finally, with the last of these five parables, things turn ugly.

This time, the kingdom is like a net thrown into the sea to catch fish. Brought to shore, the catch is divided between good fish and bad fish – the good into baskets and the bad thrown out.

“So it will be at the end of the age,” we’re told. Apparently by Jesus. The evil separated from the righteous, with the evil thrown into the fire, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is Matthew’s signature expression to bring to mind the horror of final punishment, one of six times it’s used. It’s found only one other time in the Gospels, in Luke, and nowhere else in the Greek scriptures – the so-called “New” Testament.

For that and other reasons, scholarship widely suggests that the phrasing belongs to Matthew, not Jesus – added later to bring a tone of hyperbolic, but apocalyptic, severity and urgency to the overall message.

Such a notion does not vibrate with the Jesus I know. And frankly, Jesus was far more concerned with the here and now – again, the kingdom is here, AND it is coming.

As Dr. King wrote, “We must not take this story as a theology of the afterlife. Jesus accepted the hereafter as a reality, but never sought to describe it. There is always the danger that we will transform mythology into theology. ... He who seeks to describe the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell is taking the mystery out of religion and incarcerating it in the walls of an illogical logic. Jesus had no such intentions. He was merely telling a parable to get over a basic truth about this life.

“He who takes this parable as a description of the history and geography of the afterlife is transplanting it violently from its native soil to a barren literalism where it cannot live.”

In addition, the Jesus I know – as we have reflected many times – is quick to blur the lines between sinner and saint, weeder and weed, who is in and who is out.

Point to some final, eternal punishment of the unrighteous if you want, but don’t be so sure you’re as righteous as you think. In truth, we are all a blend of both – and so within the kingdom of heaven, we are meant to submit to the refiner’s fire within ourselves, our

own “goodness” and “badness,” our own righteousness and evil, our own proclivity to love and our own resistance to it.

Turning away from love, from God, from each other, from ourselves, comes with its own consequences, its own weeping and gnashing of teeth. We all know what that feels like in this life.

Turning TOWARD love, gathering the life-giving fish and the life-giving wheat, and letting go of the life-stealing fish and weeds, IS what the kingdom of heaven is like. Love is the means and the end.

Verse 53 now: “When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.” Mic drop.

“Have you understood all this?” Have YOU understood all this?

Probably not. We are all works in progress. We are all bundles of love and lovelessness. Good intentions and failed attempts. Teachers and students.

Parables are meant to visit and revisit again and again. When it comes to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of love, none of us are experts.

But Jesus reminds us again and again that there is no more important place for us to be than in its training ground. The kingdom of love is here, and it is coming.

May it be so.