

“The Joy of the Kingdom”

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-46

On nights when I watch some television before going to bed, it's usually the end of an Indians game, a news channel, or a movie. My wife, on the other hand, likes to watch shows like “Storm Chasers” or “Storage Wars” that I usually find quite boring. A while back, I came home halfway through the show with the short, skinny nerd and the big fat guy with the shaved head rummaging through a storage unit they had just purchased for \$200.

I thought \$200 was pretty high priced for the junk people usually put in a storage unit. Danette assured me they were about to find a hidden treasure, which made sense since this particular storage unit made it on to their show. I wonder how many storage units don't make it on to their show because there was no hidden treasure. Sure enough, as they began to pull the junk out, they came upon a very old Harley Davidson frame, then a Harley gas tank, and eventually the original motor. The old Harley black leather jacket that looked brand new was worth more than the \$200 they'd paid. Mutt and Jeff were overjoyed! But I couldn't figure out why Danette was overjoyed. I needed to write a sermon to try to figure it out.

Jesus tells four short, little parables to follow up his longer parable of last weekend in which the kingdom of heaven was “compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.” When we wanted to go out and judge between the wheat and the weeds so we would pull the weeds out, Jesus said: “No! Let it be.”

This week in that same 13th chapter of Matthew, Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. The kingdom of heaven is like

treasure. The kingdom of heaven is like a fine pearl.” Or if Jesus were here today he might say, “the kingdom of heaven is like an old disassembled Harley in a storage unit.” Maybe not.

The kingdom of heaven is like this unremarkable, small, encased in glass mustard seed that a woman once gave me during a home visitation in Beatrice, Nebraska. She was an aging alcoholic who had not experienced much of the kingdom of heaven in this life, but still believed the kingdom of heaven is here, inconspicuous, slowly growing from it’s small beginnings into something that even “birds of the air will be able to nest in.”

It was with great joy that this woman pulled this necklace out of a desk drawer to gift it to me so that in the routine of that day, the unlikeliest of places, I might find God’s power and presence.

So one of the big questions is this: “In what unlikely places do we find God’s power and presence?” Some believe the key to experiencing God’s presence is getting mystical and otherworldly. They seek to escape the trappings of flesh and world and ascend to some higher plane where God abides.

That’s certainly not what Jesus is teaching with these four parables of the kingdom being uncovered or discovered or experienced or enjoyed in the mundane and routine of everyday life.

Others, but certainly not Lutherans, might argue that the key to connecting with the kingdom is being good enough to gain admittance. If I visit with enough elderly women in the hospital, donate enough money to the church, preach and teach well enough, then “boom” – I’m in the kingdom! But that seems at odds with Jesus’ own description of the kingdom as treasure being stumbled upon in a field as if it’s something freely given. And we Lutherans especially know that the treasure of the kingdom is freely given. We are saved by God’s free grace.

So encountering God, experiencing God's presence, and being caught up in God's love today in his kingdom are all things we can encounter joyfully in our everyday lives together.

What about here? What about right now? Do we encounter the kingdom in this place? Think about it. In these four parables, Jesus is the means by which the kingdom has come to earth. It was in Jesus that the love of God, the power of God, and a right, reconciled relationship with God could all be received. Christ's forgiveness from the cross is the mustard seed. Christ's forgiveness from the cross is the yeast. Christ's forgiveness from the cross is the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. And this is the place where that very same Jesus and his kingdom are to be encountered and enjoyed today. Do you believe that?

Do you believe that when we gather here as Divinity, that the greatest treasure of all is freely given and freely received?

Do you believe that when God's Word is read here; preached here; and sung here, that it comes from Jesus himself?

Do you believe that when you eat the bread and drink the wine of Holy Communion, that Jesus himself is communing with you?

Do you believe that when you hear "your sins are forgiven" and you are "saved by God's grace through your faith in Jesus Christ" that the power and promises of Christ are taking hold in you and doing something miraculous in you as you enjoy more and more God's kingdom.

Everyone else knows that this place is filled to the brim at Christmas and Easter with imperfect and sinful people to whom we share a message of forgiveness and hope, no matter how many times a year they warm one of our pew cushions. To the unbelieving world this sounds like absolute insanity.

St. Paul said in 1st Corinthians 1:18; “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Here’s another one to wrestle with. What if the work of the kingdom is not only found here, but also found in you? If you’re a baptized, believing follower of Jesus then the scriptures tells us that you are now a living, breathing “field” filled with the priceless treasure of Jesus.

Even with all of our past mistakes and present problems, we are filled with the treasure of Christ that can change someone else’s life and eternity. We have the compassion of Christ. We have the forgiveness of Christ. We have the desire to serve others as Christ served. We have the treasure of Christ in us that gives us joy when we share it with others.

We are the yeast in this huge lump of dough we call the world. God is the woman who takes three measures of flour, which is 1 bushel of flour, which is 16 five-pound bags of flour, to which she adds 42 cups or so of water to make it all come together into a 100 pound lump which is the world! Jesus says the whole thing is leavened!

I found out that when the yeast is added, it fills the dough with thousands of tiny pockets of carbon dioxide. When the dough is heated these pockets expand and cause the bread to rise. When God’s people were in a hurry to escape Egypt, they didn’t add the yeast so the bread didn’t rise.

But Jesus adds the yeast. The woman in his parable adds it in. Jesus on the cross adds the yeast of forgiveness. “Father, forgive them.” Jesus breathes out the Spirit upon his disciples after his resurrection. After he has ascended, he sends that same Spirit upon the church as a rushing, mighty wind.

And finally, when the church goes forth to announce the leavening of the world, it ought to be with joy that we share the treasure of the kingdom.

“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.”

Danette experiences joy just by watching others experiencing joy when they’re discovering unexpected treasures hidden away in a storage unit. How much more joy can each of us experience when we share the joy of the kingdom with others? All the suffering and sacrifice are more than worth it when we experience just one moment of joy in God’s kingdom.

Seeing the tears of joy in Alexandra’s eyes the first time I could offer her a gluten-free wafer during our June outdoor service. The joy in Allan Petrunak’s letter that he wrote to his father as he remembered and gave thanks for his father’s love at his funeral. The joy I saw in the eyes of Joe and Laura Fiorello in their Southwest Hospital maternity room where Laura had just given birth to Conner – their first-born.

When we take notice, the joy of the kingdom is around us and in us everyday. May Divinity be a place where the treasure of the kingdom is easily encountered and experienced. May each of you take that treasure from here and share it wherever you go. May Christ find you in unexpected and unlikely places this week. May the joy of the kingdom always be with you and in you.

May the peace of God . . .

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