

JULY 26, 2020 8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENECCOST YEAR A

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The Mustard Seed, the Pearl, and the Fish

There is so much richness in Jesus' teaching today and so many directions one could pursue as we seek to come to a deeper understanding of the Kingdom, the Reign of God. There are mustard seeds and yeast, discovered treasure and a pearl of great value and yes, there are fish of all sorts gathered and sorted. And oh, there is the master of the household finally sorting it all out, what is new and what is old. Just as I am doing unpacking my belongings. I went through them and got rid of stuff while packing, and now being in the house I am sorting through it all again as I unpack each and every box.

One could surely take any one of these paths and be blessed with an encounter with The Holy which would, which surely could on its own shape your day, your days as you dive deep into it.

The mustard plant of Palestine was quite different from the mustard plant which we know in this country. The mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, the seed of the cypress tree is still smaller. For example, Professor Barclay wrote in his "The Gospel of Matthew": 'the Jews talked of a drop of blood as small as a mustard seed or if they were talking of some tiny breach of the ceremonial law, they would speak of a

defilement as small as a mustard seed, and Jesus himself used the phrase in this way when he spoke of faith as a grain of mustard seed.’

Jesus said that his kingdom was like the mustard seed and its growth into a tree. The point is crystal clear. The kingdom of heaven starts from the smallest beginnings, but no one knows where it will end.

Rev. Janet Hurt comments in *The Mustard Seed and the Pastor*: ‘You have heard, I know, that John Lewis died, that Civil Rights icon who as a very young man heard a call to something more than he had ever known. And I wonder who or what planted a ‘mustard seed’ in his heart when so many others who shared his history and circumstance could not or did not experience the same. And as I consider his story, I think of the seeds that have been planted in you and in me which as they grow and flourish can and should also provide shelter for the flourishing of the very Reign of God where all people, but especially those who have had and continue to live so far from the gifts and promises of God’s Kingdom — especially, yes, black and brown people in my own community and in yours.’

Rev. Hunt continues: ‘I think of those seeds and I think now of especially one, a pastor’s tears. I was there, I am certain of it, but I was not quite 7 years old, in the spring of my first-grade year. We were in worship where we would have been every Sunday morning at the 10:30 service.’

‘The Thursday before, Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated at dinner time while standing on a balcony outside his second-floor room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Years later my mother told me that on Sunday morning our pastor had spoken of it those few short days later and that he wept as he spoke.’

‘I do not know who or what had planted such seeds in him which could have resulted in his apparently out of character very public Sunday morning response to a tragedy which was and has been repeated again and again and shapes us still. I only know that I have carried the mere story of his tears close to my own heart all these years as I have wondered at what it is to pastor, yes, but also simply to live and in even small ways to lead in a world which falls so very short of the vision Jesus held up for us so long ago. Indeed, today I would say that those long-ago tears have continued to nurture in me the understanding that the church’s place is to speak to heartbreak and injustice in the world. And so much more.’

And so now it is that I wonder, I do, not only at the origin of the seeds which have been planted and nurtured and grown in each and all of us. I also wonder at the amazing things those seeds can accomplish. And in the case of the mustard seed, I can almost see it with the birds sailing in and under the shelter it provides, feeding their young, protecting them from predators, teaching them to fly. And I cannot help

but consider that the seeds planted in you and in me are meant to be and do the same: to provide shelter and sustenance so that others might also flourish and grow. That such seeds are planted and again nurtured and grown that life might not only begin.

Just like with most any living thing, so has the story of the planting of this seed within my own heart been one of growth, yes, but one that has grown in fits and starts. Of not necessarily having been nurtured by what I learned in school. Indeed, this ‘mustard seed’s call to grow: to be and do more is certainly receiving plenty of sunshine and rain in these days in our world and in the community where there are other companions both like and unlike me who have also sensed that this or something like it has been planted in them as well.

At least for me, As one whose growth is often deepened in relationships, in conversations, and in stepping out where I have never been before among those with whom I might not normally spend my time, it is also nurtured in learning. I am growing by simply reading the stories of those whose gifts and experiences, challenges, and hopes and heartaches have been long unreachable to me. In part because they were perhaps not easily available. In larger part, it is true, because my own curiosity had not yet taken me there. And while book learning is not enough, it can go some distance to build foundations under the seeds planted in me so long ago.

Matthew 13:44 says: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure which lays hidden in a field.’ Although this parable sounds strange to us, it would sound perfectly natural to people in Palestine in the days of Jesus. Even to this day it paints a picture which people in that part of the world would know well.

In Professor Barclays book, ‘The Gospel of Matthew’ he writes

‘In the ancient world there were banks, but not banks such as ordinary people could use. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most cherished belongings.’

‘It was common practice for people to hide their valuables in the ground when war threatened to flow over them. Hoping that the day would come when they could return and regain them.’

It may be through Professor Barclay says that in this parable ‘Jesus glorifies a man who was guilty of very sharp practice in that he hid the treasure and then took steps to possess himself of it. Barclay goes on to say: there are certain most suggestive truths hidden in this parable.

- (1) It is suggestive to find the kingdom of heaven compared to a pearl. A pearl was the loveliest of all possessions which means the kingdom of heaven is the loveliest thing in the world. To be in the kingdom is to accept and to do the will of God. To do the will of God is no grim, grey, agonizing thing; it is a lovely thing. There is only one way to bring peace to the heart, joy to

the mind, beauty to the life and that is to accept and to do the will of God.

- (2) It is suggestive to find that there are other pearls but only one pearl of great price. There are many fine things in this world and many things in which we can find loveliness. We can find loveliness in knowledge and in the reaches of the human mind, in art and music and literature and all the triumphs of the human spirit; we can find the loveliness is serving our neighbors, even if the service springs from humanitarian rather than from purely Christian motives; we can find loveliness in human relationships. The supreme beauty lies in the acceptance of the will of God. This is not to belittle the other things; they too are pearls; but the supreme pearl is the willing obedience which makes us friends of God.

- (3) We find in this parable the same point as in the previous one – but with a difference. The man who was digging the field was not searching for treasure; he came upon it quite by chance. The man who was searching for the pearls was spending his life in the search.’

But no matter whether the discovery was made in the moment or was the result of a lifetime’s search, the reaction was the same – everything had to be sold and sacrificed to gain the precious thing. Once again we are left with the same truth –

that, however people discover the will of God for themselves, whether it is in the lightning flash of a moment's illumination or at the end of a long and conscious search, it is worth anything to accept it unhesitatingly.

Then in Matthew 13:47-50 reads:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was cast into the sea, and which gathered all kinds of things. When it was full, they hauled it up on to the shore, and sat down, and collected the good contents into containers, but threw the useless contents away. So, it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come, and they will separate the evil from the righteous, and they will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there.”

It was the most natural thing in the world that Jesus should use illustrations from fishing when he was speaking to fishermen. There were two main ways of fishing. One was with casting nets; it was a hand net which was casted from shore. The second way of fishing was with the dragnet, what we would call the seine-net. This is the way referred to in this parable. The seine net was a great square net with cords at each corner, and weighted so that, at rest, it hung, upright in the water.

According to Professor Barclay, there are two great lessons in this parable.

1. 'It is the nature of the dragnet that it does not and cannot discriminate. It is bound to draw in all kinds of things in its course through the water. Its contents are bound to be a mixture. If we apply that to the Church, which is the instrument of God's kingdom upon earth, it means that the Church cannot be discriminative but is bound to be a mixture of all kinds of people, good and bad, useless and useful. There have always been two views of the Church; the exclusive view holds that the Church is for people who are good, people who are really and fully committed, people who are quite different from the world. The inclusive view feels instinctively that the Church must be open to all, and that, like the dragnet as long as it is a human institution it is bound to be a mixture. That is exactly what this parable teaches.
2. This parable teaches that the time of separation will come when the good and the bad are sent to their respective destinations. That separation, certain as it is, is not our work but God's. It is our duty to gather in all who will come, and not to judge or separate, but to leave the final judgement to God.'

With each parable we have today Jesus teaches us that faith as small as a mustard seed can grow with time and care into a life with God.

We have something more valuable than anything else in the world, the love of God. We belong to him; we all are family with God as our Father.

And as a Church, we are to welcome all that seek Jesus and accept them into our family. No one should be judged for any reason, we all one in Christ. We should cast out our own net and welcome whoever it catches.

Thanks be to God.