

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

What happens when we die? This is the age old question that we don't have an answer to on this side of death. There are so many theories that exist, like we become a part of the universe, or we are born into another life on earth, or life was just a dream that we wake up from. And there is the Christian truth we find in the Bible telling us we are born into eternal life with the triune God, and we live in heaven. In today's gospel reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus explain about heaven, and it really isn't clear what he means.

I'm sure you've seen cartoons of bearded old men in white robes hanging out on clouds. Or maybe you've read the book of Revelation and believe the streets are paved with gold and there is no darkness. In today's reading Jesus doesn't infer this at all. In fact, what he does explain leaves us in the dark, there is truthfully a mysterious quality surrounding heaven. But *is* heaven what Jesus is talking about here? Maybe. However, Jesus is describing aspects of the "kingdom of heaven"; he is not describing the physical aspects of heaven itself.

Jesus is explaining how the kingdom of heaven is breaking into our lives, into our world. He is talking about the heavenly rule over all things. Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. In Matthew 3:2 he proclaimed, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Jesus is telling people to open their eyes, God is near in our daily lives, we only need to realize and accept it. This is what Jesus is teaching in today's gospel reading.

The reading began, "The kingdom of heaven is like mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his 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." A mustard seed is teeny tiny, and when planted, quickly grows into a large plant. It is believed Jesus is speaking of the kind of mustard seed that grows into a bush, more of a very large weed than a tree, something that is not easy to get rid of once it has a hold. No farmer would want this in their field, especially if it attracted birds. Birds are a nuisance to farmers, think of all the scarecrows we used to see in the garden that were meant to scare away the birds.

Yet if you listen to the verse carefully you understand that this farmer intentionally planted the seed in his garden and allowed it to grow to shelter the birds. Jesus turns our world upside down; he turns our thinking around. He tells us that even though we plant tiny seeds of God, once they are planted, they grow quickly and spread into a larger place to welcome those on the margins of society.

The next verse tells us that "the kingdom of heaven is like a yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

I used to bake bread all the time; I actually financed my Christmas shopping one year by selling loaves of bread to the women I worked with so they would have them for their Thanksgiving meals. Yeast is a very powerful substance; a little goes a long way. When kneaded into flour and water, the gooey mixture turns into a dough with a satin sheen. When the dough is set aside in a warm place it will at least double in size. Then when baked, it will rise a little more. When it is done, break it open while it's still warm and it has what can be called a heavenly fragrance. That's how the office smelled the day before Thanksgiving that year.

So just as the smell overtook the office, just as the yeast expands in bread, Jesus is saying that the influence of heaven is spreading in our world. The yeast is mixed in and is unable to be separated from the dough.

Yet Jesus is saying even more in this verse. When I baked bread, I barely used half of a 5 pound bag of flour for 2 nice sized loaves of bread. The woman in the reading is using 3 measures, which equals about 50 pounds of flour! That amount makes so much bread that she could easily feed all her neighbors and then some. Jesus is saying that the inbreaking realm of heaven has the power to transform the world.

Today's reading then moves on to Jesus saying, "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."

Consider a poor farm hand pushing a plow with two oxen hitched to the front. As he labors in the field, he hears the clink of metal against metal. Upon inspection he discovers he has plowed up an old clay pot that has broken to reveal a plethora of gold coins, more than he can count. He covers the treasure with dirt, goes home and pulls together all the cash he can. He sells some of his belongings, he borrows a bit from relatives, when he has enough, he goes to the farmer and makes an offer on the field. When he is in possession of the field, he is ecstatic! He will have enough money to live out his life without ever toiling again. He owns the treasure!

Then we hear about an exquisite pearl. The jeweler sells all he has and purchases the pearl and rejoices.

Jesus is saying the kingdom of heaven is already among us, waiting for those with a quick eye to find it and treasure it. To claim it for our own.

Finally, Jesus ends his description of the kingdom of heaven with the verse, "Again, 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."

Fishing with a net is taking a leap of faith. Think of the time the disciples had fished all night, throwing their nets out over and over again, and coming home empty handed. When Jesus told them to cast their nets over the other side of the boat, they more than filled the net. It only takes one good cast of the net to make a fishing trip worthwhile.

Then Jesus surprises us. What started out as a fishing adventure with a fisherperson casting the net, turns into the fisherperson being part of the catch. And the catch will be separated into those worth keeping and those who are thrown back. Not something we want to hear, is it?

Jesus has given us a broad view of the kingdom of heaven, he hasn't explained what heaven is physically like. Why? Perhaps because we cannot imagine the glory, we have no earthly concept that will prepare us for living in the presence of the triune God. We need to trust that when we leave this life there will be a place prepared for us, just as Jesus told his disciples. Heaven is one of the mysteries of faith that we believe without seeing. The kingdom of heaven has come to earth with the presence of Jesus. It is up to us to discover its presence and live within its boundaries.

All glory be to God.