

## **The Kingdom of Many Gifts A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (A)**

“He told them another parable . . . And another one . . . And another one . . .”

This passage from Matthew’s Gospel always reminds me of those multiple-choice tests we would take in school! Remember? There were usually four distinct and possible answers; but the last choice was often ‘all of the above!’

It turns out that that IS the right answer to Jesus’ multiple-choice exam! ALL the parables describe some essential feature or quality or gift of the Kingdom of Heaven. Experiencing any one of them and then taking all of them together and you have some understanding of what God’s realm of life lived to its fullness, of life lived in the Spirit truly means.

To begin with, the Kingdom of Heaven (which Jesus at other times calls the Kingdom of God) is not a faraway place. It’s not the afterlife, although it’s sometimes mistaken for it. It’s not heavenly bliss (despite its name). Rather, it’s a state of earthly living and being that seeks, as closely as humanly possible, to see the created world as God desires to see it. The Kingdom is that lived condition in which, by God’s love and grace, we his creatures give to the world some of the same gifts that God has given us.

What, then, are some of these gifts of the Kingdom? Rather than merely tell us, Jesus the seasoned poet shows us. He uses vivid everyday images that his listeners would have been familiar with; he uses metaphor. So, like a tiny mustard seed, the fruit of our faithful efforts can grow from the humblest of beginnings. Like yeast, our commitment to service and sacrifice can enlarge and be strengthened. (And what a delicious cake that will be!)

But wait the test isn’t over! Like a hidden treasure, the Kingdom can reveal for us unexpected joys, a beauty and grace we may have overlooked or thought we had lost forever. Like a pearl of great price, the gifts of the Kingdom represent true wealth something we might give all our earthly wealth to attain, but something that is in the end so precious it has no cost. Like God’s grace, we will never be able to afford it; we can only receive it with gratitude and gladness.

Finally (at least for the sake of this passage), the Kingdom of Heaven is a net, cast onto the sea of life something that both feeds us and distinguishes us, that gives us discerning minds by which we can know what belongs to the Kingdom and what does not, what we are to keep and what we are to throw away. It tells us that all of what we see is not the Kingdom, not yet anyway; but that we have our own lifetimes the days God has granted us to try to shape our world into that image, to bring it into the light of that perfect realm.

Now, I have to pause here and say that, even though the answer to Jesus’ test is all of the above all the parables are correct, all are appropriate there IS one I keep coming back to (maybe you do too), one that speaks most frequently to my (often lacking) sense of confidence and hope; and that is the image of the mustard seed. For I know how hard it is to imagine that the small, seemingly insignificant things we do to try to bring the Kingdom to others will have any substantial effect. It’s not that we doubt God’s desire to grant us the strength and wisdom to do great things; it’s that we doubt our own perseverance, our staying power to use what God has gifted to us, to see things through to the end especially in the face of so much that hinders the Spirit’s growth, so much that seeks to poison God’s intended planting.

In fact, I think the worst thing we can feel in times like these is not so much fear as it is futility. It's the answer that, in our frustration and despair, we want to 'write in' on that multiple-choice exam: the answer that says, 'It won't matter anyway.'

Still, when we consider history, past and current, and the beginnings of great moral movements, we see that, almost invariably, they start with a single small thing, or a single individual person a solitary mind that holds a universal thought, one beating human heart in which is contained all the beating hearts of all the world. It just takes one . . . One who says, 'I will no longer surrender to a system of segregation and injustice by getting up and sitting in the back of the bus!' And another, inspired by that solitary stand, who says 'I will not, cannot be content to preach from this safe pulpit any longer when the collective voice of my people cry out for freedom.' Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King knew the value and the power of one.

And there are many others who know it too. They happen to be a teacher, or a co-worker, or a neighbor, or some unsung hero somewhere at some time dwelling, it would seem, in the shadows, yet whose life and work and spirit has made a greater difference than he or she could ever have imagined; whose mustard seed of love and mercy, courage and joy found its growth in unnumbered hearts for the good of countless souls.

For me, the Kingdom of God remains the awareness of that truth: that from a single source, from a tiny seed can emerge deep and long-lasting, far-reaching change. Our experience proves that from one voice can come a chorus, from one idea can come a movement. And from that chorus and that movement can come redemption for ourselves, for our nation, and for the sake of God's Kingdom on earth, a kingdom that we are ever working for, and marching for, and voting for, and singing and weeping and praying and loving for, even at this uncertain hour, even in these desperate days.

So, let us tend that seed inside us, dear friends, as small as it might be. And let us draw ever nearer to the one who has planted that seed there, and who yearns to see its steady growth and full flowering. Let our lives and our futures be determined indeed, let them be judged by how large and strong and beautiful and embracing that tree of life becomes. Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +