

What Can You Expect?

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Most people tend to believe that heaven is some far, distant place. When folks describe heaven they often speak of some favorite place, like Florida, or Hawaii, or the Smoky Mountains. The book of the Revelation to John talks about a place where there are *streets of gold, walls with precious stones and pearl gates*. Our images of heaven tend to be some form of paradise where everything is beautiful and wonderful.

But here in the gospel of Matthew Jesus does not describe *kingdom of heaven* as a place at all. He is speaking in parables and in each parable he refers to the kingdom of heaven as an activity. It is not so much a destination as a journey. For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has to do with planting seeds, discovering treasure, selling everything you have, and being caught up in a huge net.

In other words, not a place where we end up but a process we participate in.

Today's gospel reading moves in many different directions. Jesus is speaking a whole string of parables to his disciples. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus gives us several snapshots of the kingdom of Heaven. He says:

- "The kingdom of heaven is like a MUSTARD SEED."
- Or like YEAST.
- Or like A TREASURE hidden in a field.
- Or A MERCHANT in search of fine pearls.
- Or like A NET that was thrown into the sea.

Those seem like strange images to use for describing the kingdom of heaven, but they all make a point. In fact they make several points.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of Yeast both make the same point – that the kingdom of heaven might seem tiny – of no consequence – but it has great power. The mustard seed is a tiny seed, but it has the vital force in its DNA to grow into a tree – a tree large enough that *birds of the air come and make nests in its branches* (v. 32). In the same manner, a thimble-full of yeast has the power in its DNA to transform a lump of dough into something light and airy. A little yeast has the power to leaven a whole loaf of bread.

Jesus' point was that the kingdom of heaven might not seem like much at first glance – but keep your eye on it. Like an iceberg, the part of the kingdom that you see is just the tip sticking out of the water. Most of it lies out of sight, beneath the surface.

That is good news for us. Our congregation might not seem like much when measured by the world's standards. We don't have lots of money. But watch out! What you see is not what you get! There are things happening here beneath the surface – things we cannot see. God is at work here, and God has the power to transform the ordinariness of our lives into something special. Every week, we come here to worship. Every week gives us another opportunity to experience God's grace. Every week, we grow a little bit in the fellowship that we have with each other – and with God. Every week, God directs our pathway a little more clearly.

Then Jesus says that *"the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field"* or a merchant who finds a great pearl. The person who found a treasure hidden in a field sold everything so he would be able to buy that field. Jesus said that he did so *"in his joy."* Nobody had to persuade him to buy that field. Nobody had to sell him on the idea. Once he learned that there was buried treasure there, a team of horses could not have held him back. He wanted that field more than anything in the world. He joyfully sold everything he owned to get the money to buy that field.

Most of you have heard of and read *The Lion, The Witch, and Wardrobe* by CS Lewis. There are 6 other books in the series. At the end of the series *The Last Battle* Lewis contrasts the *new Narnia* with the *old Narnia*. He writes:

It is hard to explain how this sunlit land was different from the old Narnia, as it would be to tell you how the fruits of that country taste. Perhaps you will get some idea of it, if you think like this. You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking glass. And as you turned away from the window, you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard, but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there, you will know what I mean.

In his parable, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like that. On the surface, it looks ordinary, but there is treasure buried there. Once we learn of that treasure, we will happily sacrifice everything we own to possess it.

Then Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like *a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when (the net) was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good (fish) into baskets but threw out the bad (fish)* (vv. 47-48).

There were lots of fishermen in Jesus' day, so people had seen fishermen sorting through their catch of the day, keeping the good fish and throwing out the bad. Fishermen today can identify with that as well. The law requires them to throw back small fish. They also throw back fish that wouldn't be good to eat.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven will be like that. At the *end of the age*, the angels will sort out those who are righteous from those who are evil, and will throw those who are evil into the fiery furnace. This is a promise that, at the "*end of the age*," there will be justice. That's not always true today. Sometimes evil people prosper and good people don't. But Jesus promises that, in the kingdom of heaven, there will be perfect justice.

Note that Jesus says, "*Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.*"

What is that all about? Several things!

Jesus says that we are like the Jewish scribes – responsible for studying the scriptures and teaching them to others.

Jesus says that we need to be *trained for the kingdom of heaven*. How can we do that? How can we get training for life in the kingdom of heaven? Part of that training takes place here in this church, in the worship service, in our Bible study classes, in small groups, even in our coffee hour. Everything we do here is related to training for the kingdom of heaven.

But that isn't enough. We need to engage in spiritual disciplines wherever we are. We need to pray and read the Bible. We need to keep God in our hearts through the week. We need to be seven-day Christians.

Maybe Jesus wishes he had called brighter, more faithful, more courageous disciples. Maybe. All I know is that we are the best he's got. There is nobody but us. We may not be the best, but by his grace, we are his body.

This may be one of the biggest challenges of the Christian faith. Sometimes it's easier to believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead than to believe that he was resurrected to be present in and through the church. Lots of people can believe that Christ has a body, but they can't buy the idea that the church is it.

I know people who have been looking for the perfect church all of their lives – a pure, faithful, undeniably obvious church. I know pastors who have spent 30 years on the verge of active ministry. They are ready for ministry if only they ever find a really good church. The truth is, this church is the only *good church* there is. For better or worse, this is the form that the Risen Christ has chosen to take in the world. It may not look impressive, but this we believe.

Jesus tells us that we are "*like the master of a household.*" What would the master of a household do? For one thing, he or she would set the spiritual tone for the family. For another thing, he or she would take responsibility for shepherding the family safely through the dangers of life.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, the one "who brings out of his treasure what is old *instead* of what is new." He doesn't say, what is new *instead* of what is old." There is no privilege of place for either the old or the new here. We are to embrace both. We are called to love both what has been received and be ready to receive that which has yet to be given, both the old and the new.

At our best, we do this. We submit to the ancient wisdom of the saints. We try to read and understand the Bible. We try to listen to and learn their music, the old hymns and songs of praise. And we listen for God's word in today's newspaper, in contemporary events. We might listen to a new tune now and then as we attempt to sing God's song in a new way. We bring out of the treasure of God's revelation that which is new and that which is old.

I suppose that some of us are better at one than the other. Some of us love the past and nurture it joyfully. Others of us are always looking for "new and improved models" of everything. I think it takes both kinds to make up a strong congregation. Perhaps it takes both kinds of faith within an individual Christian. Maybe at one time your spiritual need is such that you need the word from the past, that reassuring confession that Jesus Christ has been Lord for those who have come before us, and will therefore be Lord for us as well.

At other times you need the gift of freshness, some stunning new insight.

The good thing is when our worship, service, and mission can move back and forth between the two, bringing out among us the treasure that God has given us in what is old and what is new.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
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