

Sermon for Proper 12, Year A

1 Kings 3:5-12

Psalm 119:129-136

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In worship this morning, we must confront two truths. First off, we must confront the truth of our own situation here at St. Luke's. Second, we must confront the truth of the Kingdom of God, presented to us in parables from the gospel of Matthew.

This past week, the leadership of St. Luke's had to make the difficult decision to return to online worship. This is not what any of us want; if you are like me, you long to be in a church full of fellow Christians, singing hymns and partaking in the Eucharist. There is nothing wrong with feeling that way; in fact, our deep desires for fellowship and the sacraments are sacred. Yet, at this time we cannot gather together in care of our neighbor.

A common phrase in the church world is that we are "Building the Kingdom of God" as if we, the church, or we, each of us, are somehow responsible to implement God's Kingdom. Under that view, it would seem essential that the church be wedded to the growth mindset, a mindset that has dominated American culture since our early days as a nation. Our responsibility as kingdom builders is to increase the size of our churches, something we have admittedly failed at as a denomination in recent years. We need to build bigger church buildings, bring in new families, and expand our ministries. We need to build the Kingdom of God. This fits right into our cultural mindset to grow; we need to grow our bank accounts, be better and faster humans in our jobs, and grow our GDP. We need to grow. We need to be the Best. This is the narrative of American Progress.

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

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.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.

We are not responsible for implementing God's Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven has already come.

In the first parable, a woman mixes leaven into three measures of flour. She hid the yeast, the kingdom, in the flour; in Jewish culture this would be a foul of passover laws, wherein the woman would be expected to cast out the yeast. Yet here, the object that should be cast aside grows leavened bread; the undertones of communion here are palpable.

The treasure hidden in a field is not someone finding treasure on their own property; it is a thief. They find a treasure, return it to the ground, and purchase the land, and thus the rights to the treasure. Then and now, this thief would seem undeserving of this treasure.

The pearl of great value is bought by a merchant; here too we find someone of a dubious character. Yet that person, who survives by buying and selling property, sells everything they have; they go out of business in order to acquire the pearl of great value. This acquisition does not bring them any more money; it bankrupts them, and puts them out of their societal role.

Finally, the famous Parable of the mustard seed. Remember last week when Mtr. Allison preached about the weeds within the wheat? Jesus is not planting good seeds here: Mustard was a common weed. Again, Jesus' parable is subverting our expectations of what the kingdom should be. The Kingdom is not something we acquire by normal means. It is not something society deems valuable, or, if it is, it is not something we come by honestly. So is Jesus telling us to be dishonest? No.

What we see in these parables is a critique of society. Instead of following Jewish custom, the woman goes outside of the bounds of Passover law to preserve the yeast, the kingdom. The treasure seeker resorts to dishonesty in order to purchase the field in which he finds the treasure. The merchant gives up his wealth in order to acquire the Pearl of great Value. The farmer raises the mustard seed, something seemingly of little value, in order to grow a great bush where all the birds may nest. The parables challenge our expectations of what the Kingdom is and how we are to get to it.

If our expectation of our church's success hinges solely on our actions, then we are doomed from the beginning. We are a broken people; we have little in common. People at St. Luke's come from different political parties. Some of us expect to reopen now, while others breathed a quiet sigh of relief when we closed. We live in different neighborhoods, occupy different social roles. We would be unlikely friends or neighbors in life outside of these walls. However, we do share one thing in common; we are members of the church, the body of Christ.

The body of Christ, Paul tells us, is not monolithic. The body is composed of hands and feet and eyes and ears and so many other parts. Our society tells us, we must only commune with those like us: the rich with the rich, the poor with the poor. Yet in the Church, the Rich and the Poor drink from the same cup; they eat the same bread; they are members of the same body, and they bring to the body their own unique gifts. The Church, the body of Christ, is the ushering in of the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us these parables so that we realize no matter what the progress or growth of the church over the last 2000 years, it all depends on the faith we have; the great price that we pay for the kingdom of heaven. God calls us together in this church, many different people into one body, that we might be schooled in this faith and witness to the kingdom of heaven in the world right now. We are not called to create that kingdom, or achieve certain goals. We are called instead to witness to the One who walked among the Galileans, and the One who is with us now, even in the midst of this. Even now.

America is not the Kingdom of Heaven. So when our society whispers to us that we must do this or that, we turn to the parables; which show that the kingdom is not like society expects it to be. Those who find the kingdom of heaven give up all they have for it. Those who find the kingdom of heaven are willing to sacrifice their favored (or unfavored) place in society.

So yes, we must wait another two weeks to re-gather, maybe longer, and we do not know how long it will be until our lives will regain a sense of normalcy. Perhaps we are acquiring a new sense of normalcy now. Yet the Kingdom of Heaven is not dependent our sense of normalcy and comfort. No, the Kingdom is dependent on God alone. When we would endanger our sisters and brothers by gathering in-person, we will stay home; just as Christians have during times of pandemic for centuries. We must find new ways to express our faithfulness, say our prayers together, and build the community of our church. For in the final measure, the church is not a building, or a weekly worship service. The Church is the Body of Christ— the truest expression of God's Kingdom breaking through into the world, as we wait; yes, not as we build, but wait; for the fullness of the Kingdom of God. So we must ask ourselves; would we give up everything we have for the pearl of Great Value? Will you give up everything when Jesus says “come and follow me?”