

[1 Kings 3:5-12](#)

[Psalm 119:129-136](#)

[Romans 8:26-39](#)

[Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#)

SERMON FOR JULY 30, 2023

Sermon: **PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM**

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Summary: Parables of assurance, promise, and trust.

We mentioned a couple of weeks ago that the Gospel of Matthew is a very carefully constructed work of writing. At that time, we drew attention to the way in which Matthew went through all the recorded sayings of Jesus, selected out those that seemed to have the same general topic, and then put all of those relating sayings together as if they were part of a single long sermon or monologue, resulting in what we call the five great discourses that are evenly spaced throughout Matthew's gospel.

Chapter Thirteen presents another example of that careful construction. It's commonly referred to as the Parables chapters. And once again, it's pretty clear that Matthew has exercised artistic license in bringing his material together. It's highly unlikely that at any point in His ministry, Jesus' style of preaching consisted in simply running off a series of parables related to different subjects. That would be a very odd way of addressing an audience, and in fact neither in Matthew nor any of the other Gospel writers do we find any examples of Jesus speaking in this way.

So obviously Jesus' use of parables or stories or verbal pictures would have been to amplify upon or illustrate or in some way to render more vivid and concrete whatever the topic or issue under discussion, just as speakers have always done. And it's also important to remember that this was an oral culture; the audience would have been hearing Jesus usually for the first and only time, and so it was important to speak to them in a way that might stick in their minds, and

stories and strong images obviously do that more effectively than a dry and cold analysis like the one I'm giving now.

Anyway, part of the nourishment we receive in thinking about these parables, is trying to imagine the question or issue that was the topic under consideration when Jesus offered them to the hearing of those to whom or with whom he was speaking. And if we look at them through that lens, it's pretty clear that of the five parables included in today's reading, there are two pairs of doublets, that is, two parables that were probably offered together in the context of discussing some particular topics.

The last of the parables we read for today is usually called the Parable of the Dragnet, and it was almost certainly a doublet of the parable of the wheat and the tares that we discussed last week, and its conclusion, where the angels of heaven descend and cast the unwanted fish into eternal fire where they will gnash their teeth, was almost certainly, just as in the Wheat and the Tares, Matthew's own interpretation, and equally misguided here as it was there. But we'll save that comparison for another day. Instead, this morning, we'll spend our time thinking about the two other pairs.

The first pair of parables that Jesus almost certainly would have offered in tandem are the similes of the grain of mustard seed and of a small piece of leaven added to a much larger mass of unleavened dough. Although they're strikingly different images, they both represent processes through which something small is transformed into something large.

And as such, it seems safe to regard them both as parables of encouragement, and Jesus in all likelihood offered them to his small group of students in the context of a discussion about the seemingly impossible task which Jesus was setting for them.

Remember that his disciples were all Jews, and not very sophisticated Jews at that. Jesus had already been able to create in their minds the real possibility that he himself was the long-awaited Messiah; but these Jews would have thought the same thing that all Jews thought: that the coming of the Messiah would involve the catastrophic destruction of the old world and the sudden and dramatic introduction of the Kingdom of God.

So we can imagine Jesus sitting around a campfire one night with his students, and one of them asks him: "Rabbi, what we have always been taught and believe is that the Messiah will come as an irresistible conqueror anointed and empowered by

almighty God, that he will initiate a time of terrible calamity and destruction that we have always called the Day of the Lord, and that after that short period of time, all that is evil and corrupt in the world will be eradicated, and a new and better age will begin. Rabbi, is that how this Kingdom of God that you mention so often will come about? And will we be the generals of your army, the ministers of your government?”

And we can imagine Jesus looking around at his little ragtag group of followers and saying something like this: “Let me tell you how this will happen. The coming of the Kingdom of God will be like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, that eventually grows into a mighty sheltering tree; or again, the Kingdom of God is like a small piece of leaven mixed into a large quantity of dough, that gradually transforms that dough into something new and delicious. You, my children, are like that seed; you, my children, are like that tiny lump of leaven. I am the farmer planting the seed; I am the woman, adding leaven to the dough. Do you understand?”

So on that evening, in a couple of simple parables, he would have starting the long process of changing their understanding both of himself and of themselves.

And of course they would not have fully grasped his meaning at that time. But later, after his death and resurrection, they would have remembered his little parables, and found in them the encouragement they needed to plant themselves into the world, to mix the leaven of their ministry of the Spirit into the dough of all humanity.

And surely this is also the meaning of these little parables for all of us. Each word of Christian faith we utter, each prayer on behalf of others we offer is a seed; every act of Christian charity we mix into the world, every time we forgive another, we are adding our bit to leaven the world. We may never ourselves see the tree that grows out of our seed or the loaves of delicious bread produced from our leaven, but that’s all right. That’s the way God wants it all to work.

And if we continue to imagine that evening around the campfire, we might imagine the disciples looking around at each other, with a look of perplexity on their faces. And we can imagine one of them finally mustering the courage to ask another question. Perhaps it was one of the two brothers, James or John, because we remember how on another occasion they asked Jesus which of them would have the greatest administrative authority in his coming Kingdom, because they were still thinking about earthly kingdoms and earthly power. So perhaps one of

them said something along these lines: “So that’s it? We get to be a seed or a piece of leaven? Is that our reward? Is that all we can expect?”

And as the light from the campfire flickers on their anxious and puzzled faces, Jesus again smiles, and says: “There was once a farmer plowing in a field who turned up a buried treasure, and the joy of his discovery was so overwhelming that it surpassed everything else in his experience. And there was another man, a merchant, who came across a pearl of greater value than anything else he ever owned or could ever hope to possess, who was also transformed by joy. Trust me on this. Such will be your experience as well.”

A few weeks back we talked from the pulpit about the miracle of Pentecost, when the Christ’s own spirit was sent from heaven and entered into the hearts of those disciples as well as others. We don’t have the personal record from any of them what that experience was like for them. The closest we have on record is what Saint Paul wrote about his own comparable experience, and we can imagine that all of theirs must have been similar. Here’s how Saint Paul put it, in words of matchless beauty and conviction that we had occasion to remember a few weeks back, but which bear repeating today, as encouragement to us as we attempt to follow in their footsteps:

7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...(Philippians 3: 7-10)

And so our prayer for this morning and this message, heavenly Father, is that you help us always remain mindful of the eternal importance of small things, small acts of love, simple words of kindness; little acts of faith; and that you open our spirits to the eternal joys that await those who commit their daily journey to following Jesus, our Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.