

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 ³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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.” ³³ He told them another parable: “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”... ⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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“The Little Things”

Rev. Amy Terhune

In the spring of 1977, a London-based auction house went out to the Hereford, England to do an appraisal fair for local residents. They took along BBC journalist Bruce Parker, antiques expert Arthur Negus, and a camera crew to film a documentary, which aired on the BBC that fall. The top execs weren't sure about it. After all, who wants to see John and Jane Public's rusty old musket from Great Uncle Milton? But to their surprise, a movement arose, spawning the most successful on-going program ever on public broadcasting. It's called “Antiques Roadshow”, and still today, “...millions of viewers tune in week after week to watch people just like you and me discover that the bowl Aunt Bessie gave them for their wedding or the picture they bought at a flea market back in the 80s is a rarity worth four—maybe even five—figures.

“What gives the show its drama—aside from the hope that we will see something we possess being appraised for thousands of dollars—is the fact that the people featured do not recognize what they have. To them, it is just a piece of the scenery or another interesting oddity collecting dust. Having seen it around the house for years or having paid little or nothing for it, they assume its only value is sentimental. [adapted from Donald M. Tuttle, illustrations for Matthew 13:44-52 on www.Sermons.com.)

That is always the danger—that we won't be able to distinguish what is truly worth something from that which is worth nothing. In today's lessons, which seem more like an odd collection of sayings, Jesus introduces us the Kingdom of God, a hidden treasure buried just beneath our awareness. What once looked like a dented, dusty, used up relic to be discarded for the landfill, Jesus embraces. He dusts it off, cleans out the little knicks and crevices, unveils a hidden luster, ups the ante, widens the view, lends wisdom, and reveals God! These past few weeks, we've been delving into these images. A sower went out to sow seeds, flung 'em all over the place. A farmer planted good wheat and an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat, so they grew up together. Because Jesus can't actually describe the Kingdom of God.

How can one explain that it is both a present and future reality? How can one talk about the idea that it's not so much something 'out there' as it is something that resides within us? And how can one illuminate the concept of a journey rather than a destination? The Kingdom is not a place. It's a

journey. It's active – sowing seeds, growing plants, rising dough, questing for treasure, throwing nets. There is considerable evocative power in the statement: the Kingdom of heaven is like...

Today, we continue that exercise, only it's not sustained stories now. As we said, Jesus gives us a series of images, like snapshots. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into a huge tree, or yeast that is 'hidden' (according to the original Greek) in three measures of flour. Such benign and clear similes obviously suggest that the kingdom of heaven starts small and grows—which is emphatically true. But we can't stop there or we do a real injustice to message Jesus would communicate. Mustard is a lowly garden herb easily overlooked. In fact, it's a weed – did you know that? Once you plant it, you'll never get rid of it. It can grow into a fairly sizeable bush or shrub, sometimes as high as six feet, but no matter how you spin it, mustard doesn't ever grow into a tree. In suggesting the image, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of heaven is something completely unexpected and magnificent, and by all accounts, impossible, which is not readily recognizable in the tiny seed before our eyes. It's the same basic idea with the yeast. In Hebrew tradition, yeast was generally used as a symbol for corruption. Jesus completely reverses the image, suggesting that what others see in his message as unfavorable and even destructive is the very truth of God. Moreover, three measures of flour is something like 10 or 15 pounds of flour. Can you imagine how big a mound of dough would be if it was made from just 10 pounds of flour! I've made bread. Kneading six cups for ten minutes takes all my strength and makes me break out in a sweat! Jesus is talking about an impossible amount of dough for one person to knead or manage—unless that one is God.

“There's a story about a certain husband who wanted to cheer up his ailing wife, so he went into the kitchen with the idea of baking some fresh bread. He went to the store for ingredients, and then, on the counter he carefully assembled the flour, shortening, milk, yeast, etc. The directions called for one packet of yeast. The man had bought a small jar of yeast. Not knowing that there was a difference, he added the entire jar of yeast to the mix. A little while later his wife called downstairs, "Honey, have you put the bread in the oven?" The distraught husband yelled back up to her, "In the oven? I can't keep it in the kitchen!" [from "Lightning Struck" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

And that's the point. The Kingdom of God begins with little things, hidden things, seemingly insignificant things, but God's grace infuses it, and thus it comes spilling over every conceivable limit or barrier, bursting beyond every expectation. To Matthew's small, persecuted, seemingly insignificant community of believers comes the promise of an experience so extravagant; so beyond belief, that it is almost too big to take in.

You and I have often have little appreciation for the impact of this image. Like those who have gone before us right back to the very beginning, we like controlled and manageable experiences of God—things we can take in, process and understand. Jesus blows that right out of the water. True experiences of God's kingdom among us will always overwhelm us with grace beyond measure, love too deep to ever fully comprehend, and a call on our lives and choices that will seem impossible or crazy to those outside the experience. God can do so much with so little! In one small person like you or me, one small moment in time, one small act, there is always the possibility for God to step in and use us! The Kingdom of Heaven, says Jesus, is the work of God in the little things.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure in a field, like a merchant in search of fine pearls. Take care not to get to literal with this. After all, there's little honor in some field worker stumbling across a treasure in the field, hushing it up so no one else will know, and then going to buy the field off the unsuspecting owner who has no idea the value of what's on his land. If we push the details, we lose the message. The first fellow out in the field stumbles across his treasure quite by accident. The second fellow, a merchant, has been searching diligently for years. But in both cases, the one who finds treasure gives up everything else in order to possess it. In both cases, priorities are radically reassessed in the light of new discoveries.

“There is an ancient legend about the monk who found a precious jewel. A short time later, the monk met a traveler, who said he was hungry and asked the monk if he would share some of his

provisions. When the monk opened his bag, the traveler saw the jewel and, on an impulse, asked the monk if he could have it. Amazingly, the monk gave the traveler the jewel.

“The traveler departed quickly overjoyed with his new possession. However, a few days later, he came back, searching for the monk. He returned the jewel to the monk and made a request: “Please give me that which enabled you to freely give me this thing of enormous value!”

“Talk about reordered priorities. I love this last parable because Jesus does not say the Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl of great price. No. He says the kingdom of heaven is like the one who gives up everything to get it. That’s commitment to a greater cause. That’s sacrifice and hard work. [adapted from “What Is Heaven Like?” by Brett Blair and Staff, www.Sermon.com.] The Kingdom of Heaven, says Jesus, is God’s gift of meaning and purpose in courageously giving up ourselves to something greater than we are by ourselves. It is a gift of rearranged priorities which value hope, love, relationships, generosity, and compassion, and which hold things material possessions, wealth, and prestige in proper perspective as tools. The Kingdom is discovered by those with the courage to stake everything on Christ.

The last part of our lesson states that the kingdom of Heaven is like a net thrown into the sea to catch fish of every kind, which will then be sorted into fish that are (presumably) good to eat, and fish that aren’t. In other words, they keep the Trout and the Perch, but throw out the Asian Carp, which is all well and good if you’re talking about fish. But if one goes and applies the parable to Christian life, as we’re meant to do, it gets tricky. I mean, it is very clear in this parable that we’re the fish! And some of us, I guess, are trout and perch, and some of us are Asian Carp. But wait a minute. Asian Carp certainly are not good for the Great Lakes, but it’s not an Asian Carp’s fault that it is an Asian Carp. It can’t control its genetic formation. So why should it get thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, just because it’s an Asian Carp. Again, if we’re talking about fish, this is irrelevant, but if we’re talking about people, well that’s another story. As we noted last week in talking about the fields of wheat and weeds, there really aren’t good and bad people. We’re all of us a mixture of both! Do we have control over whether we get kept or thrown out?

Let me suggest to you that the answer is yes. One may separate sheep and goats, or trout and Asian Carp, based on biology. But that’s not how God does it. Scripture, through psalm, prophet, gospel, and epistle, makes the point thousands of times that human beings are small, weak, broken, sinful. And we are. The psalmist says it best in Psalm 8: What are human beings that you are mindful of them, O Lord, or mortals that you care about them? But he answers his own question, doesn’t he. We’re made in God’s image, crowned with glory. What does that mean? It means we’re loved. We may be small, weak, broken, and sinful, but we are not powerless. We can cause great hurt, or we can cause great love. But we do not have an unavoidable fate over which we have no control. We are not locked in to our past. And if you don’t believe me, let me submit that Jesus makes it very clear in the way that he embraced prostitutes, tax-collectors, adulteresses, and even corrupt leaders, that he never believed any of us were beyond hope or redemption. Instead, he made it very clear that the choice is always before us. We have a role to play in being a part of the Kingdom and God is eternally optimistic that we’ll accept it. The kingdom of God, said Jesus, comes alive in us when recognize that no matter how many bad choices we make, there is always the opportunity to reverse ourselves. And all we have to do is let ourselves be caught. The net isn’t death. It’s grace. The ones who refuse to acknowledge new possibilities, opportunities for redemption and resurrection – they’re already gnashing their teeth in a hell of their own making. Don’t go there. Let the master pull you in. The Kingdom of Heaven, says Jesus, is the grace of God to everyone in the ever-extended hand of love and fresh starts.

The work of God within the little things, God’s gift of meaning and purpose in courageously giving up ourselves to something greater, God’s grace in the ever-extended hand of love and fresh starts—pictures of truth painted powerfully through story and metaphor. Images of God’s work using a fusion of ancient themes (something old) with Jesus’ own twist (something new). And that, too, is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Thanks be to God. Amen.