

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
26 July 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I love the game show “The Price is Right,” although I haven’t seen it in years. I remember always feeling bad for the contestants who guessed the wrong price, turn after turn, and ended up going home with nothing but a few consolation prizes. Let me give you an example: a small refrigerator would come onto the stage. The viewers know it could not be worth more than 200 dollars, but unavoidably the player on station one would value the refrigerator at 3,000 dollars. After awhile I used to wonder if the person was doing this on purpose. Had he ever been to a supermarket? Did he have access to the Internet? If he had, he would have known that the salt shaker was worth 5 dollars and not the 700 dollars he just shouted! In a way, today’s Gospel reading is about this same thing.

For the last few weeks we have been talking about the Parables of the Kingdom in Matthew, Chapter 13. Last week, we saw the parable of the wheat and the weeds. This week we end the chapter with a passage that includes an astonishing 6 parables: (1) The Mustard Seed, (2) The leavened bread, (3) The treasure hidden in the field, (4) The great pearl, (5) The net, and (6) The Kingdom scribe, a little phrase some think is a parable.

There is an extravagant tone in the gospel today, almost a sense of overkill. The passage starts with “Jesus put before the crowds *another* parable” (italics mine). From the start the passage tells us that this is one of many parables Christ tells about the kingdom. This is another way to explain the reality of the Kingdom. Then after the first parable is told about mustard seeds, the passage says, “He told them *another* parable”, this one about yeast. Then another, and then we hear the words, “*again*”, and “*again*”... Until finally he asks them, “Have you understood all this?”

It would appear as though Jesus will tell as many parables and stories as are necessary until the crowds understand what the Kingdom of God is, and how it relates to them. The goal is understanding. He wants them to understand what he is about, and he will have a parable that connects to each person in the audience if this is what it takes. Are you a farmer? Let me tell you about mustard plants. Are you a fisherman? Let me tell you about a net. Are you a housewife or a baker? Let me tell you about yeast. The Kingdom is for everyone!

Today’s passage seeks to connect to each of the hearers in a personal way so that he or she may understand their place in God’s Kingdom. We know that when we hear the expression “The kingdom of God” we are talking about the rule of God, the place where God is supreme, the proper relationship with God that seeks to honor him and glorify his holy name, the supreme reign of God over everything that is.

The kingdom is both a physical as well as a spiritual reality, a place as well as a relationship, a here in the world as well as a here in my heart. To advance God's kingdom is to help others think of God as primary in their lives, to advance God's peace, love, justice, compassion, and forgiveness to the entire world. To seek first the kingdom of God is to seek God above everything else and to seek to advance God's love for the world to all, starting with people God places in our lives, and continuing from there on.

So, today Christ tells us that God's Kingdom, a proper relationship with God in Christ may appear to be insignificant when looked at with human eyes. To have a proper relationship with God may be as important to the world as a small mustard seed. Yet, for those who possess that small mustard seed and allow it to grow in their hearts that seed becomes a mighty bush that can provide comfort, shelter, and hope to others. The Mustard bush provides us protection from the sun, provides a place for birds to make their nests and feed, and becomes a blessing for both humans and birds alike. A proper relationship with God, even if it appears insignificant to others, can make our lives a blessing to the world.

A proper relationship with God is the only yeast that can leaven the entire world. All it takes is a little, and that little can go a long way. There are other yeasts out there like the Sadducee yeast of secularism or the Pharisee yeast of self-righteous moralism, but those yeasts are dangerous to the world and the individual. The yeast of secularism places value only in material possessions and personal achievement. The yeast of the Pharisee places value only in self-improvement, self-betterment, self-psychology. But, ultimately, these yeasts are dangerous. The only yeast that saves the world is the yeast of the Kingdom. Only yeast of the Gospel of Jesus has the power to bless the entire world.

A proper relationship with God in Christ is as a priceless pearl. It grabs your mind and your heart in such a way that, those who are so grabbed, are willing to pay the ultimate price. They are willing to sacrifice all to attain this relationship. They are willing to sell all they have to seek the Kingdom. It is like a treasure of incalculable value. Like a great pearl. Once they come to know Christ and to love him, they will do anything they can to secure that relationship, to advance it, and to share it with others.

Unfortunately, this is not how the world thinks of price and worth. The world seldom thinks of relationships as worthy of great sacrifice. The world wants easy religion that demands nothing and requires nothing. But, today Christ reminds us that finding the treasure requires commitment and sacrifice, which might include losing all we have in order to attain it. This flies in the face of our human understanding of success and greatness. For our world fame, reputation, and material possession are the greatest values. As Joseph Sizo once said, "Let it never be forgotten that glamour is not greatness; applause is not fame; prominence is not eminence. The man of the hour is not apt to be

the man of the ages. A stone may sparkle, but that does not make it a diamond. A man may have money, but that does not make him a success."

There is a story about Benjamin Franklin that illustrates this point: When Benjamin Franklin was seven years old a friend gave him some change. Later Franklin saw another boy playing with a whistle and gave him all his money for it. He enjoyed playing the whistle until he realized he had given four times as much as the whistle was worth. Later in life when Franklin saw a man neglecting his family for business or a man giving up friendship for the sake of accumulating wealth, he would say, "He pays too much for his whistle."

Today's gospel tells us clearly that there is a difference between price and worth. We are often willing to pay too much for things that have very little worth. We obsess about them, phantasize about them, believe that our lives would radically changed if we possessed them. Unfortunately, when it comes to things with real worth, things of great value, we are often unwilling to pay even the smallest of prices. Today Jesus reminds us that having a proper relationship with God in Christ, coming under the absolute possession of Christ, being grabbed by his love and his overwhelming mercy are the most valuable treasure a person can ever have. Christ himself is the great treasure. Christ himself is the great pearl. Christ himself is the great yeast. Christ himself is the reality that is of utmost importance for our lives.

The real question then is this: "Are we willing to pay the price?"