

Pentecost 8 Sermon  
The Growing Influence of God's Love  
July 30, 2017

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. 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." He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measure 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 brought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

In our first reading for today when Solomon follows King David to the throne of Israel, God wonders what he wants. Being king was an enormous responsibility, and many grave threats lay in wait. There was the possibility of internal strife and someone coming along who might want to lead a rebellion. There were also several larger and more powerful neighbors, peoples led by unpredictable and potentially dangerous rulers. So it surely would not have been unreasonable to ask God for protection from his enemies. Also, being the most powerful person in the country, there were numerous temptations. Solomon could easily have succumbed to the desire for great wealth and ostentation, and a long life to enjoy this luxury. Such desires were not uncommon in the world of royalty, just as it's not uncommon today either.

But he asked for neither. Rather, taking his responsibility to God and his people seriously, he asked for a wise and discerning heart instead. This clearly tells us that Solomon desired to use his position and influence to serve something greater than himself. Protection and self-enrichment were secondary to his desire to give of himself to a greater cause—to serve God by serving justice and the well being of Israel. This, of course, God was very pleased with, for it clearly testified to the fact that Solomon was not in this for the sake of ego-minded and self-centered reasons. He was not focused on himself and how being king had possibilities for self-enrichment. Rather, he was in it to serve a cause greater than himself, namely, God's will and the people's well being. This is of far more value even to himself.

In our gospel text for today, Jesus tells a number of parables that are designed to teach us what it means to seek the kingdom of God. Here too the underlying question is, "What do you seek in life?" While not everyone is faced with serving as a king, nevertheless, everyone is faced with the necessity of making choices. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher credited with inventing what is called "existentialism," made this vital point to the intellectuals of his day. He wanted them to understand that the truth about God is not something we reach by intellectual learning and inquiry. In fact, even apart from our faith in God, life is a task that requires making choices. Our brief time on this planet forces us to decide what we are going to live for--what we are going to live and die for based on what we think confers the greatest value to our lives.

Indulge me for a moment to use myself as an example. When I completed my seminary training (and by that time we were married so it was a joint decision), I needed to decide whether I was going to pursue doctoral studies, or do my internship and seek ordination as a pastor. At the same time, we were considering whether or not to have our first child. Obviously, and for a number of reasons, I chose the latter, partly because I felt called to the ministry, and partly because we wanted to start a family. This choice determined what the shape of my life would become, and it was based on what I considered to be of greatest value and of ultimate concern. This is how it is for everyone. Life is a task that requires choices. And those choices are based on what we value most.

In his parables concerning treasure and the pearl of great value, Jesus is illustrating how the Kingdom of God is also about making a choice based on the thing we consider to be of greatest value. In doing so, Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God is not to be defined as a reference about going to heaven when we die. The Kingdom of God is something that can be sought and found, at least in the partial form, now and in the present. Moreover, while ultimately it is a gift, neither the man who bought the field nor the merchant who sold everything he had earned or worked for this precious treasure but rather found it, and only then discovered it was of such value that everything else they had couldn't compare to it. Nevertheless, they had to chose and sacrifice in order to obtain it. It didn't just fall into their laps. It was and is a task that involves difficult choices. Moreover, those choices are based—like anything else—on an assessment of its value.

In a conversation I had with my eldest son, we were talking about a particular employee's fate with the company. I asked him how he was going to decide whether or not to keep him on. His answer was blunt and to the point. "Will this person add value to the company or not? If so, he has a job. If not, he doesn't, because the purpose of the organization is to add value for the investors. That's the way the system is supposed to work."

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, however, the question is not, "Are we going to add value to it?" The question is, "Is the Kingdom going to add value to us?" According to Jesus' parable, the Kingdom of God adds value beyond measure, so much so, that when a person truly makes an accurate assessment, it is seen to have more value than all other things combined. So let's be clear on what the Kingdom of God is. The Greek words *basileu to theou* mean the rule or reign of God. It means making the choice to receive the

present reign of God in your life. And how do we do that? By receiving he who brings God's reign to us, namely, God's Son, Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus was constantly talking about this. God sent Jesus to rule in our hearts and minds through faith. We confess him as the rule of God every week in the Apostles' Creed when we say he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

But this doesn't really tell us what the nature of this rule is. Let me illustrate this with a familiar story about Martin Luther. As a young monk, Luther believed that God ruled through God's law. In order to be rightly related to God, you had to live in compliance with his law. Therefore, Luther's conscience, formed and shaped by the demands of the law, was constantly overburdened by the feeling that he was unworthy of God, that he was less than he should be, and that others were better than he was. In today's world, Luther would be like that person who tried and tried to achieve success, tried and tried to achieve a comfortable measure of wealth, tried and tried to live up to the ideals set before him (the goals that everyone says will lead to happiness, joy, and a satisfying life). Never mind the high levels of drug and alcohol abuse among the wealthy. Never mind that conspicuous consumption leads to boredom and to depression which keeps all those doctors and shrinks in business.

In any case, Luther, in a society dominated by these religious mandates, was like the person who constantly felt inadequate because he couldn't reach the level of success that he believed would result in happiness and contentment. And then one day when he was meditating on Paul's letter to the Romans, he discovered the good news of Jesus Christ. He said, "It was as if the gates of paradise had been opened up to me." Luther discovered the pearl of great price, the treasure for which he had sold everything to become a monk.

What happened was this. As Luther describes it, his unburdened conscience was completely freed from the accusations, the guilt, the shame, and the feelings of worthlessness that the law had created. He was freed. In its place, Jesus Christ, the very love of God, ruled in his conscience. And because his conscience was freed, his heart, feeling broken and inadequate, was healed and filled rather with forgiveness, new life, and the knowledge that God loved him so much that even the hairs on his head were numbered. God's love in Jesus Christ now ruled in his conscience and in his heart. It would be the same thing as if a person, who was burdened with the ideals of success and wealth but for them it was out of reach, had discovered the same thing and was thereby freed of the anxiety, the fear, and the feelings of unworthiness that causes depression. Or, as if the person who did not find joy in his wealth discovered that real and eternal joy lay in the presence of Christ in his heart.

This is what it means to find the pearl of great price. And what this results in is not an external kingdom of wealth, security, or unrealistic expectations of happiness. Rather, it creates a kingdom within; it frees us from bondage to external idols that are incapable of creating new life and happiness despite the promises made on commercials or by the latest fad. Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate treasure. As Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you will be free indeed." We need to put our hearts here, "for where your heart is, there will your treasure be also."