

A Whole New Realm

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Rev. Emily A. Peck, Sunday, July 24, 2005
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

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I thought about putting pieces of blank paper in the bulletins and some colored pencils in every pew and asking you to all draw the kingdom of heaven, but I know my own fear of drawing and I didn't want to inflict that fear on anyone else. But the kingdom of God definitely captures my imagination. I want to be able to draw it, to paint it, to sing it, to describe it in beautiful verse. But knowing my own fears of artistic limitations and understanding that some of you are probably constrained by the same limitations, I want to ask us to just close our eyes for a second and picture something that is closest to the kingdom of God as you can imagine. Is it a painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, perhaps a Monet? Is it a photograph of someone with a perfect smile on her or his face, with glistening eyes? Is it a picture of your own home? Is it the way an amazing piece of music feels in your heart?

Captured. My imagination is absolutely captured. And I really want to be there, wherever "there" is. I picture a lake with cat tails and flowers around it. It's the perfect lake for swimming; it's inviting. There are bright colors everywhere, the greens of the grass and trees, the blue of the sky. Underneath a weeping willow there is a picnic blanket that beacons to me, I know this lunch is for me and I will share with people I love. There is a cool breeze and the sun feels warm on my skin. There is a feeling of contentedness and peace. There is no pain, none at all.

But I am shaken out of that feeling because I know there is no place like that on earth. I know that when I'm on vacation, pretending there is not a worry in my life, there are people dying every second—there is poverty, abuse, unhappy marriages, absent parents, racism, cancer, religious fanaticism, oppressive government. What does that picture of reality look like to you? Does it just look like the view outside your apartment window? How can we match the two pictures up, and how can we understand the kingdom of heaven when the realities of this broken world are right in front of our faces?

Okay, if your eyes happen to still be closed, please open them! The people of Jesus' time were dealing with very similar situations to the ones we deal with. How are people oppressed by the Roman Empire able to comprehend the kingdom of God? With high taxes on everything they owned, religion being constrained by ambassadors of Emperor Augustus, and vast poverty, imagining salvation from this reality must have been very difficult. But we are an imaginative people with hope in God and in the ethics of Jesus Christ. These parables are meant to spark the imaginative hope in the disciples just as they can do for us, regardless of what artistic inhibitions we might have. That's why there's all these options....

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The last of these parables catches my attention first. Many scholars think that the parable of the scribe is actually a little insight into the writer of the Gospel. Matthew's Gospel is known as the Jewish Gospel. It is a likely hypothesis that Matthew was a Jewish man who has been touched by the teachings of Jesus. A Jewish Christian, if you will. There is always a struggle between what is old and what is new. How can you hold the old with honor while still knowing the value of the new?

Matthew is the perfect example of someone who values his old tradition of Judaism while being completely devoted to the newness of the kingdom of God as described by Jesus. Christianity without the old covenant that God makes with Abraham is the new without the old. This parable makes it clear that a scribe trained in the kingdom of heaven treasures the old and the new. I relate to this one so well! My imagination catches this parable because I understand it; I have a place to hold onto, something I understand well. And this is like the kingdom of God? Who knew?!

Here's how I relate to it: I struggle with how to describe my own faith history. I was raised Jewish, or at least a holiday Jew—we did not go to synagogue every week, but I am steeped in Jewish culture and highly value my own family history. But by the time I was in middle school, I had started going to church because I wanted to figure out what I believed. Instead of having a bat mitzvah, I was baptized. Not your traditionally Jewish coming of age. But did I convert? No. I'm still Jewish. And I'm still Christian.

Like Matthew I'm a Jewish Christian. Unlike Matthew, I'm a Jewish Christian Methodist minister. But even that is just the beginning of the confusion. I'm also a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter, a Virginia girl and a New York woman. Like me, I'm sure you are your own conglomerated mess. Without being a Virginia girl, I wouldn't be a New York woman. Without being Jewish, I don't think I would have had the faith journey that brought me to a faith in Jesus Christ. We cannot leave behind our own pasts; they are what make us who we are. I'm not saying there are not things I'd like to leave behind, but I can't. And if I could, I wouldn't.

The kingdom of heaven is like this. All the pieces of our own histories are hoping to be a part of it, and all the words of God through the Scriptures describe it. Don't forget the First Testament and the descriptions of God that we hear in the Psalms or Genesis or Lamentations. Jesus doesn't want us to only listen to him; wisdom is found in the Scriptures. When he was on this earth, there was no New Testament, only the Torah and prophets and wisdom literature that make up what we now call the Old Testament. Jesus wanted people to continue to read the Scriptures. He didn't cancel

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out the law, as Matthew writes elsewhere; he came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. The kingdom of God values the old and new. The Kingdom of God is like all of us valuing all the pieces of ourselves, valuing our grandparents' wisdom, our ancestors' stories, and our children's enthusiasm.

And if that doesn't work for you, the kingdom is like a mustard seed that is so small and grows into a tree. This parable is actually a joke. I might need to read it again because I noticed a lack of laughter when I was reading it just a minute ago. "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 the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Did you get it? I think this is joke that is lost on us because it's just from another generation. I've heard that a joke needing explanation isn't a very good joke, but let's give Jesus a break and go for the explanation anyway. The mustard seed is not actually the smallest seed of all and it definitely does not grow into a tree. Mustard is a bush and it's not actually large enough for birds to set up nests in it, although birds could settle on the branches. An olive tree is lot bigger, but its seed is also bigger. So, mustard is a very large shrub and could probably be mistaken for a small tree. But still, the kingdom of God is just like a big shrub doesn't exactly sound as impressive as, say, the kingdom of God is like a redwood tree.

What's the point of this joke, though? There is actually a very deep Jewish apocalyptic meaning. So as we try to understand Jesus the Bad Comic, let's recall that the Parable of the Scribe told us we should remember to treasure the old along with the new. The disciples do just that because when they hear about this mustard seed, they think of the book of Daniel in the First Testament; it is an apocalyptic book. Don't get scared by that word—I know that in our age, apocalyptic can bring to mind images of movies like *Apocalypse Now* or books like the *Left Behind* series. I assure you, Daniel doesn't have anything to do with people being raptured into heaven and leaving their clothes behind. Nor does Jesus intend for us to think of this when he chooses to echo Daniel. In this case, apocalypse is a genre of religious writings that are about people getting a revelation.

After that disclosure, we'll look at the echo that Jesus uses in this parable. In Daniel, a tree is described that reaches up to heaven and can be seen from the ends of the earth. This tree is the revelation that Daniel receives in a dream. The tree is so big that it provides shelter for all the animals and birds and enough food for all living beings,

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too. This is an intentional echo of Jesus. By saying that the birds of the air come and make nests in the branches of the mustard seed, he knows that his disciples will immediately think of Daniel's revelation.

Unlike the fear inspired by our modern conception of apocalyptic writings, there is an incredible amount of hope in the image of this tree in Daniel. Jesus tells this parable so that we know something as small as a mustard seed can grow to provide for every living thing. Is he talking about himself? The kingdom of God can come in a small package, even a baby born in a barn, poor and with no influence over the oppressive Empire can actually be the Messiah the people have been waiting for.

This is the same point Jesus makes with the second parable, of the yeast making three measures of flour rise. Just a little bit of yeast can make bread be bread instead of crackers. An everyday miracle, isn't it? For the people listening to Jesus, their little lives can actually help make the Roman Empire less oppressive. Our lives, our little insignificant lives, just one person in millions and millions, one step, one breath, our little molecules, our little strands of DNA, all these little things—like a mustard seed and like yeast—can make a huge difference.

When we think of the tree in Daniel, we know that our little lives can help to feed every living thing and help provide nests, places to sleep, for every living thing. No matter how big the kingdom of earth is, even three measures of flour, our little lives can live as if in the kingdom of God instead.

The next two parables tell us why we might want to do that. We read that 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. We also read that the kingdom is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. Upon finding one pearl of great value, he sells everything he has to buy that one. This parable tells us that the joy of the kingdom of heaven will absolutely astound you. Its value is so high that it's worth selling everything you own just to have it. This doesn't mean that you can buy your way into the kingdom of God. What this means is that nothing you own is more valuable than the kingdom of God and if you only knew how marvelous it was, you'd do anything and everything to get there, to see it, to experience it.

Jesus shows us how to have a piece of this amazing kingdom now. He teaches us how to live as if the kingdom has already come. Through his teachings we know to value the poor and the oppressed. Through him we know we can and should love those who

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are hated by society. We should touch the untouchables. We should embrace the unloveables—the prostitutes and tax collectors. We should give away our excess wealth to help those who do not have as much in order to benefit the whole community.

You'll notice there's one of the parables about the kingdom of God from today's passage that I haven't yet discussed. It is the parable of the net. Part of the Kingdom of heaven is the idea of judgment and salvation. We read that at the end of the age, angels will separate the evil from the righteous. We can only assume that this is about people being separated, the evil from the righteous. Have you even been in the car and driven by billboards or church signs professing something about Heaven and Hell? I'm from the South, so I've seen it a lot. A favorite summer one reads something like this: "If you think this is hot, try Hell! Come to church at so-and-so Church and enjoy a cool eternity." You can also see signs like "over 1,000 souls saved here" at some churches. I just got a book called, *Being Methodist in the Bible Belt* that said, "Keeping score of what God has done is one way of declaring and celebrating the power of God... [but] Methodists care so deeply about salvation that such a billboard claim does not represent full Methodist thought." It's not as easy for Methodists as you're saved and you're damned.

The way Jesus talks about salvation in this parable is to make his disciples think about Jewish law. Again, Jesus does not want his followers to forget their past or forget commandments of God; this is what the Parable of the Scribe teaches us. The type of net described in this parable is one that is attached either between two boats or between the boat and someone on the shore. It is then dragged through the water and literally catches every kind of fish. When the net is taken in, the fish have be sorted through because there is a law in Leviticus that says a good fish has scales and fins and can be eaten; other kinds of fish are forbidden.

The kingdom of Heaven is as irresistible as this net. Everyone is caught in it—the good, the bad, the murderers, the altruists, the Emperor of Rome, and the fishermen of the Galilee. We know that we have the freedom to live for the one who is drawing in the net, God. We don't need to be bogged down in fatalism or distraught by fear of judgment. We do need to know that we have the freedom to delight in the kingdom that treats the poor with dignity, that provides us all with grace, that values ethical treatment of others and not wealth. We have the freedom to value nothing in our lives as much as we value the possibilities we learn about through Christ. Possibilities that encompass our own histories, and every word we've heard about God.

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Possibilities in what we learn from the small package of a baby born in a barn to a poor family who has a connection to God we can barely imagine but desperately want and that can be fulfilled like a tiny seed that grows into the biggest of all shrubs.