

"A Few More Pictures of the Kingdom."

Gen. 29:15-28;

Ps. 105:1-11, 45; Matt. 13:31-33, 44-52

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For the past several weeks we have been looking at Chapter 13 in Matthew's Gospel. In it Jesus lifts up a variety of images of the Kingdom of God. There are quite a few and they are all different. I don't think Jesus was trying to confuse us. Rather, I think he was trying to enrich us and expand our thinking about the Kingdom and give us pictures to hang up on the walls of our spiritual homes, a gallery of Gospel glimpses for our hearts and minds.

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus tell the parable of the Sower, likening God to an extravagant and spendthrift farmer who scatters the Word hither and yon, knowing that it will produce a good crop in the hearts of those who are open to it.

Last week Jesus told the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. In that story the good crop was sown in good soil but, during the night an enemy, came and sowed weeds in amongst the wheat.

The servants of the Master wanted to set things right immediately by pulling out the weeds, but the Master stopped them saying, "In your haste to set things right you would do more harm than good. Let the wheat and the weeds grow up together and then my reapers will sort them out at the final harvest."

First, the Sower sowed the Word into human soil. We are the receptive earth in which the Word grows and yields a harvest. Then, the Master sowed the children of light into the soil. The

enemy sowed the children of darkness alongside of them and both are to grow up together until the final harvest.

Now, today we have the Kingdom likened to the mustard seed: tiny at first, but capable of growing into a large bush capable of providing shelter to the birds of the air. Are we the mustard seed? Are we the soil? Are we the birds? Jesus doesn't say.

Next we have the image of yeast leavening the whole batch of flour. Like yeast going to work on dough, God's Kingdom affects everything with which it comes into contact. Are we the dough? Are we the yeast? Are we those eager and hungry hearts yearning for bread? As the body of Christ, are we the "bread" that will nourish others? Again, Jesus doesn't say.

The next picture depicts a somewhat subversive image. Jesus says the Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. When discovered, the lucky person quickly hides it again, sells everything and perhaps even takes out an extra mortgage in order to buy the field.

It is a bit like someone at a garage sale who discovers a wad of \$100 bills in an old purse. The purse is on sale for \$2.00. Moral dilemma! Do you tell the owner or just plunk down your 2 dollars and hightail it out of there, trying your best to keep from shouting for joy?

Then there is a merchant who is on the lookout for fine pearls. Finding one, he does whatever it takes to secure it. This wasn't a chance occurrence. He didn't just stumble on the pearl. He didn't buy it out from under someone who didn't know what they had (or at least we think he didn't). He was devoting all his energies in search of that rare find.

Last, but not least, Jesus throws out the image of a net cast into the sea and gathering in all kinds of fish. This parable picture is of the end times when the angels sort out the good from the bad like fishermen sorting through fish.

Near the end of the chapter Jesus asks his disciples (and us !) whether we have picked up all the nuance and all the meaning in his teaching. They seem rather quick to answer "Yes". But there's so much here and so little said about it.

Mustard seed, yeast, treasure, pearl, net of fish - - taken together, they show us there's a lot of activity wherever the Kingdom of God is. Sometimes it is seemingly insignificant, but soon it becomes overpowering. Other times it is so obviously excellent it dwarfs everything else right from the start.

As with pictures, so with parables: some of them move us more than others. In particular, I find Jesus' image of the yeast especially powerful.

Robert Capon suggests that although the mustard seed is small, with enough time and effort one could gather them up and keep them from spreading. But not so with the yeast. Once it has gone to work on the flour and water and sugar and salt, things change. It is impossible to separate out the yeast from the rest of the dough.

And this baker is no slouch! Three measures of flour is the equivalent of a bushel basket of flour or about 16 - 5 pound bags. That, along with around 42 cups of water will yield about 100 pounds of dough. When was the last time you worked 100 pounds of dough?

And the yeast has that interesting way of putting bubbles into the dough. The bubbles are filled with carbon dioxide, the same stuff we breathe out. It's a rather apt image when we talk about how God's Spirit is breathed into us. Just like the yeast that transforms the dough, God's Spirit transforms us.

And just like the yeast that cannot be separated from the rest of the dough once it has begun its transforming work, so too we, once we are enlivened by the Spirit of God we cannot be separated from God. I think this is what St. Paul was getting at when he penned his letter to the Romans. In Chapter 8 he asks the question, "What can separate us from the love of Christ?"

He goes on to list many things: "... hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword". But he ends with the firm assurance that there is nothing in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.

God has breathed life into us, new life, Spirit-filled life. It is like that wonderful discovery (that hidden treasure) that sets our hearts racing. It is like the thing we have been on the lookout for all our lives (that pearl of great price) that suddenly shows up and we know what we must do: we must devote our lives to it.

From small beginnings of faith and the Spirit, great things can come. Don't be disheartened. Don't fret. Don't think that the work you are given to do in Jesus' name won't ever amount to much.

The Kingdom is subversive, unexpected, already among us, hidden and yet found, deserving of our best efforts and a cause for deep joy.

We are like the bread of heaven, created and enriched by the Spirit's leavening power so that through us a needy and a hungry world might find its needs and its hunger met.

We have much to celebrate, much to share. We can be part of the change that we want to see in the world around us.

Think about how we as the body of Christ in the world can be a model of the Kingdom here and now as we seek, first and foremost, to be alert and alive and aware and anxious to see all that God will do in and through us, all for the glory of his holy name.

Amen.