

Canterbury United Methodist Church  
New Traditions  
August 21, 2016

Text: Matthew 13:44-46

Focus: In the text for the day, Jesus uses parables to describe the nature of the Kingdom of God. A treasure found unexpectedly in a field, a merchant searching for the pearl of great value, are two ways that Jesus describes the Kingdom.

Function: For many Christians, the Kingdom of God is understood to mean the reality that we will find in a future time and place when we encounter God in His heaven. Given all of the violence and hate raging around us in the world, how can the Kingdom possibly be here and now? Is it possible that we have been thinking about the Kingdom of God in too small a way.

Prayer: Gracious and almighty God, we come to you this morning with hearts that are full this morning...with images in our minds of little boys caked in dust and blood sitting in a daze in the back of a Syrian ambulance...images of unbelievable flooding in Louisiana that have left tens of thousands homeless and in great need...where in the world is the Kingdom of God? We need it so much now... God give us the understanding that your Kingdom in this world is in our hearts...it is in how we treat each other...and that your church is a vehicle to learn how to love each other in a new and different way...a way that is capable of changing the world. In the name of your son, Jesus...amen.

## The Kingdom of God...and the Church

### 1) **If you've come to visit in my office, you may have seen these pictures**

#### **before....**

- a) On the day I came to work at Canterbury 15 years ago, I hung these two pictures on the wall in my office...and I did it for a reason...
- b) The one on the left is a picture of the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome...we were there just two weeks ago. Arguably, it is the most beautiful church in the world. The sheer beauty and volume of the space inside St. Peter's is almost overwhelming...there were people standing all around with their mouths hanging open...

- c) But as beautiful and grand as St. Peter's is, its past is a little bit of a mixed bag. Because you see, the capital campaign to finance the building of this beautiful cathedral involved the selling of indulgences by the church under the leadership of Pope Julius II and the 20 popes that followed him. Indulgences were kind of like get into heaven free cards, that the church gave in exchange for the money used to build St. Peter's.
- d) That practice enraged Martin Luther, and was one of the reasons that he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany in protest in 1532...which lead ultimately to the translation of the Bible from Latin to German...which together with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg only about 20 miles away, lead to the first Bibles that ordinary German people could read....which ultimately lead to the breakaway from the Roman Catholic church and the formation of the Protestant church, of which, 500 years later, we are a part.
- e) The picture on the right is different...it is of a simple crystal of ice...formed in the chill of winter by a running mountain stream.
- f) The picture on the left is beautiful...but was formed by the hands of man. The picture on the right is exquisitely beautiful...formed by God's hands in His creation.
- g) Why are these two pictures hanging in my office? I hung these two pictures side by side in my office as a daily reminder that the church is not God.
- h) I wanted to have a way of reminding myself that as caught up as I might have gotten in the church, and how it works over time...that it will never take God's place in my life, or in our lives...

2) **Did you see what I did there? How we think dualistically...**

- a) I took a topic, and in order to figure out how to think about it, I divided it into two parts...
- b) In my example here, the two parts are the Church and God...and by dividing them, I set them up in opposition...
- c) Any time we compare two things as humans, we do this...by dividing them and setting them up in opposition...we are able to add attributes we like to one side and ones we don't like to the other side....
- d) We do this all the time, with many different areas of our lives...

- i) If this side is Auburn, this side would be Alabama
- ii) If this side is Republicans, then this side would be Democrats
- iii) If this side is America, then this side would be the rest of the world...or whoever is our enemy at the moment.
- iv) If this side is Christians...then this side would be any other religion...especially Islam...the way some Christians think...
- e) We start thinking tribally in this way, and in order to convince ourselves of the goodness of our tribe...we have to ascribe badness to the opposing tribe
- f) And when we ascribe badness to other people, we begin to demonize them...and when we do that, it's not long before hateful words emerge, and in the most extreme cases, before bullets and missiles begin to fly...
- g) This kind of thinking is called dualistic thinking, and as many as 80% percent of us think in this way...

### **3) What is this Kingdom of God anyway?**

- a) The sermon series that we started last week centers on the Kingdom of God and the focus today is on the Kingdom of God and the church.
- b) The Kingdom of God (which is sometimes phrased as the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's gospel) is a term that used a lot in the Bible....between the two phrases it is used 135 times in scripture.
- c) Jesus talked a lot about it too...particularly in the parables...
- d) He said...the Kingdom of God is like...
  - i) A farmer who finds an item of great value unexpectedly in a field, or
  - ii) A merchant of pearls who is seeking a pearl of great value, or
  - iii) It is like a net thrown into the sea, which caught fish of every kind.
  - iv) Jesus keeps talking about it: Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it...or

- v) It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God...
- e) In Luke, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say Look, here it is! or There it is! For in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.”
- f) And in John, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.”
- g) If Jesus talked about it so often, it must be important. If it appears so often in the Bible, it must be important to understand...

**4) I think we’ve been thinking about the Kingdom in too small a way...**

- a) I think we’ve fallen into a habit of thinking about the Kingdom of God as another way to say what heaven will be like...
- b) I think we sometimes think that being a part of the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven is making the cut in order to get into heaven in the next life...
- c) I think we sometimes think of the Kingdom of Heaven is something that will happen in the future, and we don’t have to worry about it so much now...
- d) And I think that that small picture we have in our minds is not the whole story...
- e) I think we’ve divided it down in our minds so that it might not even be half of the story...

**5) Here is something I believe....**

- a) I think the Kingdom of God has to do with how we see ourselves in relation to others...how we treat one another...
- b) I think the Kingdom of God, very simply, comes from a life of loving God first, and loving everyone else as much as we love ourselves...

- c) I think the Kingdom of God does not involve the church dividing itself from others...trying to protect our faith from what we perceive to be threats from others religions or groups that understand their faith in God in different ways...
- d) Because when we go into defensive mode and try to protect our understanding of the faith, we sink down into a dual position that is opposed to others and we lose the ability to love them as Jesus has instructed us to do...
- e) We lose the ability to think non-dually about the people that we are supposed to be loving....understanding that it is not us vs. them...that it is about us and them together...
- f) Richard Rohr said it this way:

“The binary, dualistic mind cannot deal with contradictions, paradox, or mystery, all of which are at the heart of religion. Sadly, a large percentage of religious people become and remain quite rigid thinkers because their religion taught them that to be faithful, obedient, and stalwart in the ways of God, they had to seek some ideal “order” instead of growing in their capacity for love. These are not bad people; they simply never learned much about living inside of paradox and mystery as the very nature of faith.

“The kingdom of God” is Jesus’ term for the bigger frame, or what we often call “the big picture.” You’ve got to find some framework that allows you to stand back and look at the moment with the eyes of Infinite Love and Mercy. Then you’ll see that many things which appear to be contradictory through logical, egocentric, dualistic thinking might not necessarily be so to a nondual mind...”

### 1) **The story of Tre Fontane...**

- a) On our trip to Rome a couple of weeks ago, we stopped at a place outside of the city where tradition holds that St. Paul’s life ended.
- b) This place is call Tre Fontane, or three fountains because it is said that following his beheading at the hands of Nero, each place where Paul’s head touched the ground, God cause a spring of water to well up from the earth.

- c) There is a small Roman Catholic church built over the spot where St. Paul was martyred, and early Sunday morning just two weeks ago, we met the parish priest for that little Catholic church...
- d) We made friends with him and he offered to tell us the story of what happened there. He showed us the little chapel with the three aspes symbolic of the three fountains. He showed us the altar dedicated to St. Paul and to St. Peter. He showed us the pillar upon which Paul was beheaded.
- e) We told him that our little group of pilgrims from Canterbury would like to receive communion that morning, and we expected to be told that the rules of his church would not permit that...
- f) But that's not what happened...he looked at us with a smile on his face and said to us, "We are brothers in Christ together...you are welcome to serve communion here. Let me offer you our vestments and our communion elements..."
- g) What followed was one of the holiest moments of the trip. Wearing Roman Catholic robes, and holding Roman Catholic wine and communion wafers, two United Methodists served 30 other Methodists (and one other person from Sri Lanka who just happened to be there) holy communion on the spot where Paul's life ended.
- h) It was remarkable. Some would say that it should not have happened. But it did...and it did because a Roman Catholic parish priest was willing to see the situation...not as us vs. them...but in a larger context as "both/and."

## 2) **And so....**

- a) Fifteen years later...I continue to see the church as God's instrument in bringing his kingdom to the world. There is no doubt that it has its flaws because of the flawed humans, like me, that it is made up of...but I still think it is the hope of the world....
- b) That the role of the church in bringing about the Kingdom of God is to provide a place of safety where those who are following Jesus practice loving in a non-dualistic way...where we understand that we are all God's people and that because we are loved that way, we can love each other that way.

- c) And because that type of love is so radical and unusual and out of the ordinary that Jesus' words will become true..."By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...if you have love for one another."
- d) That is how I see the Kingdom of God and the Church...a group of people who, in following Jesus, are willing to see the world through eyes of love, and live and treat others in a totally different way....
- e) The question is...are you willing to be a part of God's Kingdom right here...right now?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.