

Heaven Came Down

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Rev. Frank Allen

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-51

31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 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.”

33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

44 “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.

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51 “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52 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.”

IS HEAVEN BORING?

Preacher Karoline Lewis remembered a Starbucks Coffee campaign entitled, “The Way I See It.” Thought provoking quotes from various authors were printed on the coffee cups. One of those quotes (#230) was from Joel Stein, a columnist for the LA Times. Joel wrote, “Heaven is totally overrated. It seems boring. Clouds, listening to people play the harp. It should be somewhere you can’t wait to go, like a luxury hotel.

Maybe blue skies and soft music were enough to keep people in line in the 17th century, but Heaven has to step it up a bit. They're basically getting by because they only have to be better than Hell."

I'm sure that article was tongue in cheek. But, Joel had a point. Heaven as portrayed in popular culture does seem a bit boring. It's a cliché.

Sure, everyone wants to go to heaven because hell is the alternative. But, the thought of heaven seems far removed and unreal.

That's not how the Bible presents heaven. Heaven in the Bible is presented in some surprising and some very "down to earth" ways.

These past few weeks we've been talking about heaven, the kingdom of heaven. And we've learned that the kingdom of heaven is not like other kingdoms. Jesus used parables about seed sowing and harvest to illustrate the unique nature of this heavenly kingdom.

Two weeks ago we talked about the extravagance of God's grace in the heavenly kingdom. God sows his seed of salvation on all kinds of soil, both good and bad. And amazingly this haphazard method leads to a great harvest.

Last week we thought about how God overcomes evil. Instead of plucking up weeds from the field right away (and in the process destroying the wheat field) God waits until the end, and then makes a judgment. Perhaps we should show the same kind of patience and forbearance.

Today's parables are about how heaven gets started here on earth.

Heaven gets started in surprising and unlikely places. Heaven is not a far away place with clouds, angels and harp music. Heaven is a kingdom, a movement of God's grace that graciously takes over everything.

A MUSTARD SEED

First, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It's a really tiny seed that we may not even notice. But, when you sow it, it turns into a large bush that provides shelter for the birds of the air.

Remember that a parable is a story with a surprise. A parable has a twist that you don't expect.

At first blush, we might be tempted to say that this parable means something like the old saying, “Tall oaks from little acorns grow.” I’ve heard many a sermon on this passage that could essentially be boiled down to this phrase.

But, if we do that we have once again missed the point of this parable. We have turned this very provocative parable into a somewhat tame object lesson.

Here’s the surprise that we often miss. The mustard plant was a weed. No self-respecting farmer would want weeds in his garden, and he certainly wouldn’t want a weed that would attract birds that would eat his crops.

If Jesus were telling this parable in southern Georgia today he might say something like this, “The kingdom of God is like kudzu that a farmer planted in his field. He started with just a little bit, but pretty soon it covered not only his whole field but the highway as well!”

How can we compare the kingdom of God to the growth of an invasive plant? In the case of a weed, the inevitable growth is a nuisance and even a danger.

But, in the case of God’s kingdom the inevitable, out of control growth is a reason to give thanks.

Left to their own devices those early disciples would not have been very good evangelists. They misunderstood Jesus and often lacked the courage to follow Him.

But, they were not left to their own devices.

The Holy Spirit descended upon those first disciples and scattered them all over the world like so many wild seeds. And the gospel spread like wildfire. The kingdom of heaven became a reality in the early church. It was a down to earth example of God’s grace.

A VISION OF HEAVEN

When I think of heaven this is my vision. I envision the triumph of God’s love and justice.

I imagine a world where war is ended forever. I imagine a world where the nations gather to praise God. I imagine a world where little children are safe in their homes.

I imagine a world where people share their lives and their resources. I imagine a world where the lamb lies down with the lion and a little child shall lead them.

Where did I get such crazy, unrealistic ideas? I got those ideas from the Bible of course. This is God's idea of heaven.

You see God doesn't describe heaven as harp music and disembodied souls lounging on clouds. God tells us about heaven coming to earth. God tells us about peace on earth and God's good will toward women and men.

I know. That's hard to believe when all we see on a daily basis are war and despair.

But, Jesus tells us that in the midst of all this chaos God is still working in the background. Like the tiny mustard seed the kingdom is growing. If Jesus were preaching this message today he would say,

“Just like kudzu is taking over Georgia one day the kingdom of heaven is going to take over the world.”

Heaven is not a place to which we go. Heaven is coming to us.

YEAST AND DOUGH

And then Jesus said, “Let me give you another example. The kingdom of heaven is like a woman putting yeast into some dough and then letting it rise.”

Are there any bakers in the congregation this morning?

How many of you have made sourdough bread?

Some of the best bakers make loaves with fermented dough from a previous batch. They call this the “mother dough.” This original starter culture may be many years old, and each culture has a distinctive flavor.

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is like this mother dough. The influence of God's kingdom is many years old. But, this ancient starter culture creates new communities of faith and reshapes the world even today. In fact one day the kingdom of heaven will leaven the whole batch, the whole world. The whole world will be a tastier place on account of God's grace.

This parable is akin to the time when Jesus told his disciples that they were the “salt of the earth”.

Those few disciples would bring a new flavor to the world. They would influence the world all out of proportion to their numbers.

Once again we see that the kingdom of heaven is not an out of this world experience but a transformation of the world experience. Just as the hidden yeast inexorably transforms the batch of dough over time, so God's word of as revealed in Jesus Christ will one day transform the world.

We see this new world coming through the eyes of faith. We trust that the power of the Creator and Redeemer is greater than the powers that be.

The evil that threatens to destroy us is no match for the Savior who comes to redeem us.

In slow, hidden, and quiet ways this transformation, this re-creation of the world takes place.

OUR RESPONSE TO HEAVEN

So what should our response be to this kingdom that comes? How can we participate in this new world that is coming, the kingdom of heaven coming to earth?

Jesus gives us two parables that suggest a course of action, the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. Like the parables that precede it, this parable emphasizes the hidden nature of the treasure, the kingdom of heaven. It's presence and power are not immediately apparent.

But, when someone finds that hidden treasure priorities are immediately rearranged.

In those days when the land was forever being conquered by some army, the prudent householder gathered the family valuables and hid them in a field for safekeeping. There was no Bank of America in Jerusalem in those days so burial in the ground was your safest bet.

After things calmed down, you could go back and retrieve your valuables ... assuming, of course, that things did calm down and that you could remember where you buried your valuables before someone else happened upon them.

But, as later discoveries have indicated (even some in this century), a few people did forget where their valuables were buried or perhaps they were killed when the invading army came through their land.

This was probably the case with the treasure found by the sharecropper in Jesus' parable.

But, there was just one problem. Unclaimed buried treasure was the property of the new landowner.

So, what does the man in the story do? He seeks to become the new landowner. He quickly covers the treasure up, sells everything he has and makes the owner of the field an offer that he can't refuse.

"How much would you like for that worthless old rocky, barren field out there? Call me crazy, but I'd like to buy it?"

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like finding a fortune in the field. You are willing to give up everything else in order to buy it.

Putting this story into modern terms we might think about those very few people who win the lottery. What happens when someone wins the lottery?

Quite often the first thing that happens is that person quits his or her job! Finding that unexpected treasure totally rearranges their priorities. Now they have time to do what they really want to do.

Finding the treasure of heaven in Jesus Christ should rearrange our priorities as well. We can't be the same people when we get a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Everything else is unimportant in comparison.

That's how it happened with his first disciples. Jesus said, "Follow me," and those practical, hard working fishermen dropped their nets and followed Jesus. They walked away from family, friends and home, and for what?

It was crazy. The only reward they seemed to get for their devotion was persecution and an untimely death.

And yet, they continued to follow Jesus. The disciples saw the kingdom of heaven in the man Jesus. The disciples saw in Jesus a treasure that was worth everything.

Down through the years new disciples have heard the call of Jesus; they have found a treasure in an unlikely place and have given up everything in order that they might have the one great thing. In Jesus they have found the pearl of great price.

FINAL JUDGMENT

We will not dedicate ourselves totally to the kingdom of God until we get a glimpse of how great that treasure can be. But, when we do get a glimpse of that kingdom, our values will change. We will give up things that we used to treasure. We will be filled with joy and anticipation.

It's like finding treasure in a field, a pearl of great price or winning the lottery. But, it's much greater than that.

There will come a time when the winnings from the lottery will do you no good. There will come a time when the pearl of great price will belong to someone else. There will come a time when even the greatest treasure will return to the field from whence it came.

But, the kingdom of God is of lasting value. Remember what Jesus said about true treasure?

“Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”

(Luke 12:33)

What we value today speaks volumes about our faith. In what God do we trust? Do we trust in the God of money or do we trust in the Creator and Redeemer?

The Bible tells us that it is not possible to trust in both. We must choose.

Once again we are reminded that in the kingdom of heaven there will come a time of judgment. The weeds will be separated from the wheat.

In today's lesson that final judgment is represented by the parable of the big catch. Those of you who are fisherman and fisherwomen know that not everything you catch should be kept.

This is especially true when you are fishing with a net. Commercial fishermen have to separate the good fish from the bad fish. And Jesus tells his disciples that in the end God's angels will make this final judgment.

When we look at the injustice and the cruelty in the world, we want to know why God doesn't do something. In this passage we learn that as the kingdom of heaven comes to earth, God will do something. God will judge the evil in the world. God will bring justice to an unjust world.

Exactly how and when this will happen is up to God, but the promise of judgment brings us hope for the future, and it affects the way we live today.

I will not give up in resignation when I see bad things happening in the world.

Why? Because I believe in heaven.

I believe that in the kingdom of heaven God will judge the world. God will make right what has gone wrong.

And he has charged us to start the process of sorting between good and evil today. We are his messengers, his angels if you will. We are charged as disciples of Jesus to stand on the side of justice and truth as an act of faith.

Yes, our judgments will be flawed. In some cases we will disagree vehemently over what is just and true.

But, we will not abandon the struggle because we disagree or the way is not clear.

Why? Because we believe in heaven. We believe one day God will sort all this out, and things will be set right.

And we believe that God has trained us for this process. God has made us for heaven, and today we apply this old treasure of the gospel to new and challenging circumstances. (Matthew 13:52)

Heaven might not be like a luxury hotel, but it will not be boring! Heaven is God including us in the transformation and the recreation of the world. It is the power of resurrection unleashed on earth. In Jesus heaven came down and that changed everything.

Amen.