

“The Kingdom of Heaven”

Matthew 13:31-33, 45-50

I’m going to do something this morning that I don’t think a preacher is suppose to do but I’ll just claim ignorance. I did not grow up in a church culture that used a lectionary, I was not trained to use the lectionary and as a pastor for twenty-five years I did not regularly follow the lectionary scripture passages. In these past few years as I have had opportunity to preach in many different churches I’ve grown accustomed to considering the lectionary passages and preaching from them when that is the practice of the particular church I am in that day. I say all of that to say that I assume the preacher is expected to stick to the verses given but I could not help myself. After reading the verses in Matthew 13 I kept on reading and read verse 51. Here is what it says; “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. They said to him, ‘Yes’.” And when I read that I said, “REALLY?” “You really understood everything Jesus was saying?”

For some reason my seven year old granddaughter loves puns (play-on-words). I’m not sure how old she was when we first noticed her fascination with making a joke out of the different meanings of words but it seems she was quite young. Since her grandpa likes to try to be funny (my family keeps telling me I’m not but I think I am) I love to come up with a good play-on-words now and again. When I do I’ll say, “Calais, do you get it?” And usually she will indignantly reply, “I get it!” And she can usually explain it if you ask her to.

I thought about that interaction I have with my granddaughter when I read this account from Matthew. I still wonder did they really understand everything Jesus was saying. I suppose they may have because it was all very ordinary stuff. They would certainly know about mustard seeds and although so very little they grow to be huge bushy plants that are as big as trees. They

knew about yeast and what it does to the dough when you put it in and let it sit over night. They knew about treasures in fields and the beauty of a valuable pearl. Perhaps none of them had ever found a treasure or owned a valuable pearl but they probably knew someone who had. They knew about fishing with large dragnets and separating the good from the bad fish. Many of them had probably done that several times. However, Jesus was using all of these to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. And as I preached the last time I was here during what the church calls “ordinary time” that there is nothing particularly ordinary about the Kingdom, there is likely something in what Jesus is saying that goes beyond the ordinary stuff in the stories. Do they really understand everything Jesus is saying?

Each of these parables begin with, “The kingdom of heaven is like”. It would probably be good to start with just a brief review. I think we know that it is understood by the majority of biblical scholars that “kingdom”, “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of Heaven” are all speaking about the same thing. Some scholars believe Matthew likely did not use “kingdom of God” to avoid using the name of God and in particular it is significant when we understand who his audience was. So however it is phrased it is the “kingdom”...the reign and rule of God. One other thought about the kingdom is that I think some people like the phrase kingdom of Heaven because it conjures up images of future life, streets of gold, gates of pearl, sea of glass... you know, “heaven” that somewhere sometime place where all will be made right and no more pain or crying and no more sin. But the “kingdom” that Jesus is talking about is the reign and rule of God. It is the kingdom Jesus taught us to pray would come. It is the kingdom that Jesus said is already among you. It is the kingdom that was ushered in with the life, teaching, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It is the kingdom that we the Church are to be the living-out-demonstration of what it means to live under the reign and rule of God. It is that

kingdom that Jesus said is “like” all of these ordinary things. And once again I’m thinking that when you connect these things to the kingdom it is not such an ordinary thing.

Think with me about mustard seeds and yeast. They are very small and seemingly insignificant in relationship to the environment they are in. In one case there is a huge change and transformation into what was and what it becomes. In the other it changes everything and yet it has no noticeable or visible presence. The one common denominator it seems is growth or expansion.

Think with me about treasures and pearls. They are items of incredible worth. One is stumbled upon and the other is sought out diligently. But whether discovered by accident or on purpose they are worth whatever it costs. They are available only by complete commitment and abandon.

Think with me about the dragnet. This one sounds a little like the wheat and weeds. In the very same net... the very same net... we find good fish and bad fish. We find those who are called evil and those called righteous. There is going to be a separating day but that day is not now. Right now in the same “net” (kingdom if you will) are good fish and bad fish. And just like with the wheat and weeds it is not for those who are citizens of the kingdom to do the separating. The angels will do that.....someday.

So I read these parables and say; “I get it!” Now I understand. I have wondered why it seems so hard to get people to commit to the work of the church in these days. Is it that we just don’t know how truly valuable a treasure it is we have and that awaits us? When I get the email that says: “my name is ‘Mugabe Merando’ and I am the attorney for a wonderful Christian widow who has inherited a fortune and you can get part of that fortune” I just don’t get very excited. In fact I ignore it and I delete it. How can I be committed to a supposed fortune I have

no faith in whatsoever. However, I wonder if you were told by what you consider to be an absolutely reliable source that the power ball ticket for \$300 million that someone sent in your birthday card (you would never buy one yourself) could be claimed at midnight August 1 in Seattle what you would do. The problem is that you will have to cancel the Caribbean cruise you already have tickets for on July 31 and overall it will take a lot of work and commitment on your part to be there but I'm guessing you'll do it. I think I understand.

I have agonized at times over the fact that not only do our churches seem very insignificant to me but that people in the world consider them totally irrelevant. And indeed I may not see it but something (some ONE) is at work in and through the church. When the church lives out the call to truly be the citizens of the kingdom something happens. I do think I understand.

When I was elected District Superintendent one of the first conversations I had was with my General Superintendent. In that conversation he made a statement that as far as I know has been given to every DS in our church for the past 50 years. He said to me; "Steve, now you are going to see the dark side of the church". I've thought many times since then should it not be said to someone who is going to spend the majority of their waking hours with pastors, church boards and church leaders that "you have the greatest job in the world and will spend all your time with saints"? I think I understand.

Jesus said; "do you understand all these things?" Do you?

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