

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/24/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a

Our Gospel passage, for the third week in a row, is about Jesus teaching in parables. As you well know by now, parables are stories with a moral or lesson, usually about events in the lives of ordinary people. Jesus used parables to communicate about who God is, what the kingdom of God is like, and how God is present and at work in the world. The parables that Jesus told usually had something in them that surprised his audience - something that brought them up short and caused them to reconsider their understanding of God and God's kingdom.

It's likely that one of Jesus' intentions in teaching in parables was to make God and God's kingdom accessible to his hearers. He wanted people to know that God and the things of God - the spiritual things, the eternal things - aren't relegated to life after death. They're very much a part of life here and now. And Jesus wanted those around him to understand that God and the things of God - the spiritual things, the eternal things - aren't just high and lofty and out there somewhere, reserved for the very holy and the very religious. God and the realm of God is in, around, and very much a part of every ordinary person's everyday, ordinary life.

Can we imagine Jesus telling parables set in our own time, in our own culture? Would Jesus' parables have more impact for us if they were about things that we know and to which we easily relate? I'd like to repeat each of the five parables in today's Gospel text in sets of two, two, and one. I'll make a comment or two about them, and then tell a couple of contemporary parables with a similar theme. One of the modern-day parables will have been adapted from one written by someone else. The rest are mine, based on life in this community and elsewhere, about God and the kingdom of God in the lives of ordinary people.

Jesus said, "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 ..." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour [a huge amount] until all of it was leavened." In both of these stories, there's a contrast between tiny, seemingly unimportant beginnings and a surprisingly significant process or finished product. Sometimes we don't recognize or appreciate the potential for those tiny beginnings that are very much a part of our own daily lives. Sometimes we dismiss and disregard as weak and unimportant the very things and people that God will use to bring about wholeness, reconciliation, and peace. Are we recognizing the kingdom of God in the most humble and unlikely of people and places?

The kingdom of God is like a man convicted of possession and sale of drugs and for armed robbery, who is sentenced to years in Sing Sing. His refusal to be baited by fellow inmates and his calm presence and measured response in the midst of high anxiety among the corrections officers prevents the escalation of a fight that could have had deadly

consequences. Some of those involved, both staff and inmates, see and are intrigued by a different way of relating. Over years, the cellblock that had had the reputation for being the most unruly and the most dangerous starts to become a community.

The kingdom of heaven is like the presence of an infant in a grieving household. The baby's grandfather has died, after a rich and full life, but one that's ended unexpectedly and prematurely. The family's sorrow is palpable and their tears seemingly limitless. But with the baby's smile comes the ray of hope that life might again, somehow, be joyful. With the baby's embrace comes the conviction that in spite of the reality of the present loss, all will, somehow, be well. The healing has begun and will continue.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid again; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." These two stories stress the ultimate value of discovering God and God's kingdom. Occasionally, it seems to fall right into our laps. More often, we have to search persistently for it. But whatever the circumstances, what do we do when we find it? How important is it to us, really? What keeps us from holding onto it? What makes it slip through our fingers?

The kingdom of God is like this: a man bought shares of a technology stock twenty-five years ago for \$100, but the stock certificate was misplaced and forgotten. During a move, it is discovered, and the owner finds that he'll never have to worry about money again.¹

The kingdom of heaven is like this: The owner of a shop selling antique and rare books has dreamed of owning a particular volume as long as she's known of its existence. That book becomes available in the sale of an estate, but its price is far beyond the store owner's means. It's so important to her that she sells her business in order to buy that single volume.

The kingdom of God is like this: A man has anesthetized his inner pain with alcohol his entire adult life. Every routine and pattern that he's developed and followed has been about and around drinking. He knows that he can no longer live like this, and he chooses to pursue sobriety. And while it feels as though his life at this point is like a jigsaw puzzle suddenly being thrown into the air so that every single piece has to be retrieved and re-fitted, he knows, without a doubt, that staying sober is worth everything.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age." This last parable is about the ultimate significance of God's kingdom. It is a matter of life and death. While early Christians would have been most concerned about what they believed was Jesus' imminent return and final judgment, I wonder if, for us, this one's really about today. Are we living our lives in intentional pursuit of what's truly important and of eternal

¹ Adapted from a contemporary parable by The Rev. Todd Weir, via Textweek.com.

significance? At the end of our lives, will we look back and regret the choices that we're making right now – the way we're spending our precious time and resources? Are we choosing what's ultimately good?

(For 10 a.m. service) The kingdom of heaven is like this: A faith community gathers around a baptismal font. As the water pours over the baby's head, those who watch are moved to claim anew for themselves the cleansing forgiveness of God for the ways they've forgotten or ignored the things of God. As the baby's forehead is marked with the sign of the cross, those who watch remember that they, too, are marked as Christ's own forever. Maybe they've wandered just a bit off the path toward God; maybe they feel that they've become completely lost. But in the sacrament, the presence and power of God is real, and the call of the kingdom is clear. A new beginning is possible. They realize that their deepest desire is to be on that path.

(For 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. services) The kingdom of heaven is like this: A faith community gathers for communion. As the bread is broken and the wine poured, those who participate are moved to claim for themselves the forgiveness of God for the ways they've forgotten or ignored the things of God. As they receive the body and the blood of Christ, broken and poured out in love, they acknowledge and remember that Christ is in them, and that they are in Christ. Maybe they've wandered just a bit off the path toward God; maybe they feel that they've become completely and utterly lost. But in the sacrament, the presence and power of God is real, and the call of the kingdom is clear. A feast with God is possible. They realize that their deepest desire is to be on that path.

(For all services) The kingdom of God is here. The kingdom of God is now. Do we have eyes to see it and ears to hear it? Do we have room in our crowded lives to receive and embrace it? Amen.