

Pentecost 8A, Proper 12. Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52. July 30, 2017.

The kingdom of heaven is like something terribly small that grows to be something majestically huge, providing shelter for those in need. The kingdom of heaven is like something else very small, hidden within the shapeless lump of the world, until it changes that lump and makes the whole world rise. The kingdom of heaven is like something we stumble upon by accident, that gives us such joy that we are willing to give up everything for it. The kingdom of heaven is like something we search for our whole lives, using all of our expertise in the hunt, and then when we find it we again give up everything for it. The kingdom of heaven is like a mixed bag, a net with good fish and bad fish, red fish and blue fish, pulled together out of the place they were, to be sorted out later.

The disciples' response to all this might be the best joke in scripture. "Have you understood all this?" And I guess if you're going to lie to Jesus, you might as well do it as briefly as possible. "Yes." From a preacher's perspective, if Jesus is pretty vague on the details of the kingdom, then I'm not sure that it would be wise for me to try to get more specific. But we could add one more: the kingdom of heaven is like something that isn't here yet, or at least is not yet fully grown. It's coming, and Jesus tells us that it has drawn near, but maybe it's on a pendulum or something. Because it seems to draw near and then to recede.

I think of it like Spring in Chicago. We are assured by those who should know that on a certain date it has started. But it will probably snow that day. The flowers will eventually bloom, but there's a good chance that they will suffer both frostbite and scorching heat before their first week is out. The kingdom of God, like Spring in Chicago, is always on its way, but never quite arriving. There are days when we feel its imminence, there are even days when it seems to reign unchallenged. But it doesn't stay long, and after our first full week of 90 degree temperatures melts away the snow from the week before, we reckon it must be summer. The kingdom of God will eventually come and abide, but until then it is always coming.

This is awkward for us, because a major strain in Christian thought holds that our true citizenship is in the kingdom of God, that time or place that is coming, in which God's gentle rule is complete. This is what makes us kind of odd among our fellows, a step offbeat with the white noise monotonous consumerist humming of the world. But what on earth can it mean to be citizens of a city that isn't here yet, a city that is real, but in a way that requires some difficult explanation? And if our citizenship in this kingdom has something to do with why we come together in church each week, but the church is decidedly not the kingdom of God, then what on earth does the church have to do with the kingdom of God?

Here's my hypothesis: what we do here together is training for citizenship in God's kingdom. We don't always do it that well, and we don't always know what we should do, but when we do live well in the church, we are learning the customs and mores of living among the kinfolk of God. So we do things like listen to, be formed by, and respond to the stories of God's saving work among people. We confess our sins and failures freely and are immediately forgiven. We bring forward our concerns and our blessings in trust and gratitude. We give freely from our individual resources to support a common mission. We exchange the gift of peace, a gift that we only have to give because

we have been given it. And then we share a holy meal, with bread and wine that we provide ourselves, but by giving it to God we then receive it back again and with it nothing less than Jesus Christ himself. This meal binds us together with each other, but also, so our prayers tell us, with all the saints throughout with the world and with God.

These are the actions of worship, but they are also training us in the habits of being citizens in that city that is still on its way. And with God's grace, they prepare us to participate in that city's coming. If my hypothesis is right, then here's how this works. In our regular confession of sin and absolution, we learn the habits of honesty and forgiveness. We unlearn our deeply ingrained skills of self-deception. In our prayers of the people, we are learning vulnerability, trust, gratitude, and humility. In hearing each other's concerns and the concerns of the world, we are pulled out of our own tunnel vision and our lives are re-contextualized into a world that may not always have us at the center.

In the offertory, we are learning to transform commodities into gifts. In the exchange of the peace we learn the logic of that peaceable kingdom in which the lion lies down with the lamb: we encounter each other as persons with pure goodwill, while giving something—the peace of the Lord—that we ourselves must be given to enjoy. We make an offer to each other that we can't actually fulfill; the peace of the Lord is something that may flow through us, but we cannot manufacture or buy it. And this same logic carries over into the Eucharist, where we give bread and wine to God and receive back the body, blood, and presence of Jesus Christ.

I know, we've traveled a long way from a mustard seed, a bit of yeast, and a net full of all kinds of fish. But we think that we have to believe, to imagine, to know before we act. And so we need to know what the kingdom of God is in more definite terms than these pithy but cryptic parables before we give ourselves fully to its coming. But I'm suggesting that things might work the other way around: it takes training in certain habits to be able to imagine well the kingdom of God. When we're awake to ourselves, the things we do here turn us into disciples, teach us the customs of the city of God. And these parables might be so hard to understand because we can only see the kingdom when we have already begun to participate in its coming. Amen.