

Proper 12 (A), Pentecost 7. Eric Biddy

Well, that was A LOT of parables. Over the course of this month we have been hearing parables about the kingdom of God. Two weeks ago, we had the parable of the sower. Then last week we had the parable of the wheat and the weeds or tares. And now this week, we are positively inundated with a barrage of parables, all of which begin with “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” And we get FIVE different endings for this sentence.

This week’s reading feels like the end of a poorly planned fireworks show: where the person setting off the fireworks realizes that the show is almost over and he still has most of his rockets left. So he just lights them all at once: boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

The kingdom of heaven is like . . . It’s like a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a pearl, and an indiscriminate fishing net. The kingdom of Heaven—that time or place in which God rules, when the way of things matches the way things are meant to be, when the poor are fed and everyone gets graded on a curve.

I was struck and a little befuddled this week by this cavalcade of parables, by this image of Jesus just throwing out these similes like a waiter listing today’s specials. And I think that this is not a matter of indecision, nor is it really like that distressed fireworks conductor I mentioned earlier. It is a problem of poetry: of trying to find the language to express that deepest truest most magnificent thing—the burning kernel of truth in our hearts, our deepest secret understood and forgiven, our greatest hope surpassed.

It’s hard to do. Matthew gives us seven in this one chapter, and we get the feeling that Jesus could have gone on forever trying to describe this.

This week, I tried to extend and update this list of parables. I invited my friends on facebook to try to finish the sentence “The kingdom of God is like . . .” The results were, well, perhaps a little less theologically rich than Jesus’ parables. My communist friend suggested the Paris Commune of 1871. My nerdiest friend suggested fractals, chaos theory, and quantum physics. My most Episcopalian friend suggested a gin and tonic on her front porch. And my brother, who is finishing up a PhD in theology, suggested “A bottomless bucket of fried chicken that makes you healthier as you eat it.”

Some of these are good, some of these are ridiculous, but I think it’s actually an important exercise. Because in a few minutes we’re all going to be standing or kneeling as we pray the Lord’s Prayer, and we’ll all pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” And I think that we need to have some idea of just what it is that we are praying for when we say those words. When you pray “thy kingdom come,” what do you imagine that would look like?

I’ll be honest, most of the time I am saying these words because they are what comes next in the liturgy. And if I have a feeling as I say them, it is usually a desire for comfort for myself and those I love the most. But this week, praying “thy kingdom come” has taken on a new urgency for me. In global terms, it has been a terrible week. Don’t worry, this isn’t about to become a political sermon.

But no matter what your views are on the division of resources in the Holy Land, 1000 people killed in a week of war is bad news. No matter what your views are on US immigration policy, thousands of practical orphans crammed together with nowhere to go and too few resources to care for them properly is bad news. And whether you think Ukraine should ally itself more closely with the EU or with Russia, it is tragic that those lives were lost when that civilian plane was shot down at the Ukraine/Russia border.

It has been a terrible week, a week in which the world, and we here in this room, were made desperate for the coming of God's kingdom of love, for the time or place when the way things are finally matches the way things are meant to be. Thy kingdom come! But what is it that we're really praying for when we say that? I think that the question is not really whether God's kingdom is coming, but whether or not we are ready to see it working its quiet way through the corners of our lives and world.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed and yeast: small things, everyday things—things that are not always what we would wish for. So here is the first thing to know about the kingdom of God: it does not look very impressive at first, it does not use the tools we might expect or even want it to use. Jesus never says “the kingdom of heaven is like a perfectly performed liturgy, or like an awesomely powerful military.” No, it is like a mustard seed, it is like yeast, it is like two friends meeting unexpectedly on the street, like two strangers suddenly treating each other as friends, like the smile of a grandparent: fragile and a little tired, but bending wrinkles into patterns of hope. These small, unimportant things are the material out of which God will remake the world.

Next, the kingdom of heaven is like this treasure that this guy finds and it is like a pearl found at the end of a merchant's long search. I think this means that even though it may not come in the way we expect, we can recognize it when we see it, by two criteria: overwhelming joy, and a feeling that to preserve this we would give up everything. If it gives you joy—and please, I do not mean pleasure—then you may have found a place to look for traces of the kingdom of God. Or, if it gives you that ache, that deep ache just below your heart, where you wish above all else that all the things you want to do in this situation or for this person were possible, then you may be on the trail of the kingdom of God. Follow that ache; run with that joy. If it is the trail of the kingdom, it will lead us to good work.

And finally, the kingdom is like a net that catches all kinds of fish. This isn't a magic net that only pulls up swordfish and salmon—it's just an ordinary net that catches the good, the bad, and the ugly. The living, the delicious, the beautiful, the dead, and the rotten all get bound up together and pulled out of the deep in a single smelly bundle, to be sorted out later.

Small, ordinary things—things we often can't even see, things we may initially not want to see—this is how God works to bring about God's kingdom on earth. And this is up against war and famine and hatred and disease. It seems like a mismatch. And this week, in particular, it feels like the mustard seed was snatched up by an evil bird, or like the oven meant to bake this leavened bread is broken, like there may be a hole in God's great fishing net.

But the very smallness, the very mixedness, of God's kingdom is actually a sign of our hope. I do not say that we can relax and be happy, that everything is as it should be and good is already victorious. But I do say that good, that God's coming rule of love, is not defeated. It grows, it gathers, it flickers at the edges of what we allow ourselves to see.

We are called to look closer, to look where we don't expect God to be, and then to greet love with joy and to give everything we have to help it grow.