**“What Is It Like?”**

*Valley Presbyterian Church – July 30, 2017*

8th Sunday after Pentecost I Kings 3:5-12

Rev. John Wahl Matthew 13:44-53

What is the kingdom of heaven like? In chapter 13 of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus offers seven parables that attempt to paint the picture. In the last few weeks, we have listened to the extended parables of the sower of seed and the wheat and weeds, then the shorter parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. Now, we have heard the final three parables: two more brief stories, first about treasure in a field and then about a pearl of great price; and – finally – the parable of the fishing net. At the conclusion, Jesus asks his disciples whether they understand what he has been teaching them, and they answered, “yes.”

I’m not sure I would have the confidence to answer the same way. It makes me think of taking the SATs in high school and the questions about analogies and similes – do you remember these? They read something like:

*Treasure : kingdom :: pearl : \_\_\_\_\_\_?*

*Treasure in a field is to the kingdom of heaven as a pearl of great price is to \_\_(blank)\_\_?*

Jesus easily could have gone to his era’s Webster’s Dictionary for a more precise definition of the kingdom of heaven. Precision and clarity have their place, but I have a feeling that here, in these chapters, Jesus intends instead to stimulate the imagination of his hearers – then and now. Maybe the message we are supposed to hear is that our life with God is even better than the most breath-taking thing we can imagine.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If we are looking for definitions, biblical scholar C.H. Dodd in 1935 defined parables this way: “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So, for at least the last 80 years, a rule of thumb for interpreting the parables is this: find what is strange about it, for this can be our window into discovering the kingdom of heaven.

So, first, the parable of the hidden treasure – the man that Jesus describes is so filled with joy that he is willing to risk it all in order to get more. He wasn’t looking for treasure, he was probably just plowing the field when the blade of the plow struck a buried jar containing valuables. The treasure was a surprise of unexpected delight. In exchange for the possibility of finding more treasure – and more joy – he sells everything he has. And so, the kingdom of heaven is not simply joy; it is the kind of joy that is worth all that you have.

Next, the parable of the merchant of pearls – like the man who finds hidden treasure, the merchant who is searching for a pearl sells all that he has to purchase it. But, unlike the farmer plowing, the merchant is a seeker in search of one of the ancient world’s most valued objects – fine pearls. Unlike the man who finds his treasure by surprise, the merchant finds exactly what he is looking for and knows precisely what he found. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is something to be valued.

And, so it is with the kingdom of heaven. Some people are on a spiritual quest. They are hungry for meaning and when the kingdom is found, they recognize its priceless, pearly gleam immediately. Maybe they have been reading or praying or asking questions; maybe they have been trying out different approaches and holy practices and finally discover the depths of the goods news of the gospel. Seekers go in pursuit of something profound and they sometimes discover that the pearl they have been seeking was there all along.

But others are not on a quest at all. They have plenty to handle simply trying to cope with life. Maybe they are plowing or cooking or filing paperwork or making repairs or going to meetings or raising children – or many of these things all at once. They expect nothing more than the same old routine and anticipate that today will just be a variation of yesterday. But then something wonderful and surprising happens. Maybe it is the birth of a child, or discovery of a purpose, or an encounter with the divine. “All at once, life becomes holy. God seems near and everything pales before this new and breathtakingly priceless truth.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This pair of parables stresses the human response to what God is doing. Like buried treasure, God’s activity is hidden and must be discovered. Like a pearl of great value, it must be sought in order to be found. The kingdom of heaven, because it comes from God, is at the same time both a gift as well as a search. Thus, our response to the gift of participation in God’s realm must be complete. Those whose eyes have been opened to see what God is saying and doing in and through Jesus must commit themselves to it; willing to pay the price, ready to go “all in.”

As people living in the modern world, we hesitate at the idea of going “all in;” of selling everything for one thing; of putting all our eggs in one basket. This might be because we see ourselves as neither seekers nor finders of treasure. Unlike Jesus’ first disciples, we were not called to leave everything behind to follow Jesus. Instead, our faith journeys have been gradual and life-long, not all-of-a-sudden and world-changing.

And so, maybe it is with this last in the series of seven parables that we might best find ourselves. As some of you may know, fishing was done differently back then than how we are familiar with today. They used dragnets which would be cast out and hauled in – intending to catch anything and everything in the sea. The all-inclusive net would contain various kinds of fish and, just as the fish exist together in the sea, in the same way we must also live together peaceably, leaving the judgment of what is and is not a good catch up to God.

This parable of the net is therefore an allegory, a story in which every part stands for something beyond the story. As with the earlier parable of the weeds and the wheat, Matthew expresses here his concern about the mixed state of the church, even in its earliest days. The righteous and the evil, the good and the bad live (and swim) side-by-side, and it is our job not to separate ourselves, but to persevere in doing what Jesus teaches. If we truly believe that the kingdom of heaven is present and near, and that God is actively at work in the world, then drawing back from the world would amount to separating ourselves from God.

Taken collectively, the parables of this chapter show three different moments, or stages, in the coming of the kingdom of heaven. First, from the foundation of the world, certain things were hidden, like buried treasure in a field or a pearl of great price. Second, in the present time, the good and bad are both present – like wheat and weeds – some having ears to hear and eyes to see the hidden things that are being revealed. Those who discover these treasures – whether they stumbled upon it or were seeking it out – may need to go “all in,” disregarding everything else in order to obtain it. And third, at the end of the age, there will be a separation by the angels who will divide the righteous from the evil – as one separates wheat from weeds, good fish from bad fish – discarding the bad while gathering the good.[[4]](#footnote-4)

When Jesus asks his disciples whether they have understood what he has been teaching, he is not testing them as if they were taking the SATs. At least we would hope so, because – as his followers today – we are called not so much to information gathering as using our imaginations. What is the kingdom of heaven like? Is it like a winning lottery ticket? Is it like sorting through stuff in your attic and finding a priceless painting? Is it like a singing flash mob where only half the people know the song, but it ends up sounding as beautiful as anything you’ve ever heard?

Of the three moments, or stages, in the coming of the kingdom of heaven, we – like the first disciples – live in the second phase. It is here, but not completely; we have seen glimpses, but not its fullness. One thing we learn through these parables that Jesus tells us is that God has incredible patience – willing to wait for seeds to grow, for bread to rise, for buried treasure to be stumbled upon, and pearls of great price to be sought and found. While eventually all the varied contents of the dragnet will be sorted, there seems to be no urgency to get rid of the bad fish. Maybe this is because they have value that God alone can see.[[5]](#footnote-5)

God is a patient God – willing to wait for us whether we are out there looking or not. All the while, God is at work in the world; planting seeds and casting nets, watching and whispering, nudging and prodding. At any moment, the kingdom of heaven might be found and, in the midst of community, lived out – like the treasure it is – in joy. AMEN.

1. Todd Weir, “What is the Kingdom Like” from *bloomingcactus.com* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As quoted by Alyce McKenzie, “Strange Scripture: Reflections on the Five Parables of Matthew 13” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Long, *Matthew* from Westminster Bible Companion series. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D. Mark Davis, “Five and a Half Parables” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jill Duffield, “What is the Kingdom Like?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)