Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

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PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

This past week I have been reflecting on the little parables set forth in today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Each parable gives us an image of what Matthew calls “the kingdom of heaven.” Mark and Luke employ the term “Kingdom of God,” but Matthew substitutes the word “heaven” for “God.” For Matthew, it is the kingdom of heaven that we seek. Could it be that Matthew intentionally uses the imagery of the Lord’s Prayer “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in *heaven*”?

The “kingdom of heaven” parables describe the way in which God’s realm enters the life of the world. These little parables also describe the way in which we as Christ’s followers are to approach the realm of God as we live our lives in the world.

Let’s begin with the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

“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 and becomes a

tree, so that the birds of the air come and make

nests in its branches.” —Matthew 13:31–33

This is baffling. That someone would sow a mustard seed in his field borders on foolishness. In first century Palestine, the mustard plant was regarded as a weed and a nuisance. Pliny the Elder, writing around the year 78 CE gives the mustard plant mixed reviews. It is a malignant weed, but it is also “beneficial for the health.” Pliny goes on to say, “it grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The mustard plant was a farmer’s nightmare.

Of course, there is a contrast between the small, tiny seed, and a mustard tree so large that birds can nestle in its branches. Perhaps that is how the kingdom is. From small beginnings, important things evolve. For example, just think of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus. Her small action gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. That’s how the kingdom grows. But the kingdom can end up being like an out of control weed, something not looked upon kindly by powerful landowners in the context of 1st century Palestine, or, in our context, the principalities and powers of our world. Such is the way of the kingdom of heaven.

Let’s now turn to the little parable about the leaven.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a

woman took and mixed in with three measures

of flour until all of it was leavened.” —Matthew 13:33

Yeast mixed in dough is surely a modest image with which to describe the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is hidden as yeast is hidden in dough. It is at first unseen but without it the life of the world would be missing substance and texture. Who would want to eat bread without yeast on a daily basis? “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Next, let us turn to those two little parables describing the great value of the kingdom of heaven.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden

in a field, which someone found and hid; 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. —Matthew 13:44–45

The kingdom of heaven is the most valuable thing anyone could imagine having. Its worth far exceeds anything else. One would be foolish not to go to great lengths to buy it if it were a pearl or to purchase a field if one knew that it was buried there.

Then, finally, we have the parable of the dragnet.

“Again, 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 and threw out

the bad. —Matthew 13:47–48

What we have here is a sea filled with both good and bad fish (perhaps kosher fish and non-kosher fish?) The good and bad fish are permitted to exist together until the dragnet catches them. It is only after they are caught in the net that they are separated. So it is with the kingdom of heaven. It exists on the earth along with other kingdoms until there is a judgment. Only then does it make its appearance visible and known.

My question is: what are the other kingdoms that exist along with the kingdom of heaven? This question led me this week to re-read a little book by Ronald Wright called *A Short History of Progress.* Wright reviews the histories of several civilizations, including the middle east civilization of Sumer, the civilization that existed on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the Roman Empire, the Mayan civilization, and our own Western civilization, and he comes to the conclusion that it is each civilization’s commitment to what it believes to be progress that finally leads to its downfall in the end. Ronald Wright, in a convincing manner, says that it is our current commitment to materialism with its attendant consumerism, our belief that progress is defined by having more and more, that everything must become bigger and better, that will lead to our civilization’s downfall in the end. The social consequences of our commitment to materialism are obvious. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. As in the image of a pyramid, there are more and more people to be found at the bottom and fewer and fewer who make it to the top. Unless we change our direction, social inequity will ever be on the rise. And then there is the toll on the planet itself. Our commitment to materialism and its accompanying consumerism will in the end devour the earth’s resources. One statistic quoted by Ronald Wright says it all. He writes the following:

If civilization is to survive, it must live on

the interest, not the capital, of nature. Ecological

markers suggest that in the early 1960’s, humans

were using about 70 percent of nature’s yearly

output; by the early 1980’s, we’d reached 100

per cent; and in 1999, we were at 125 per cent.

Such numbers may be imprecise, but their trend

is clear—they mark the road to bankruptcy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In our day, the kingdom ruled by materialism and its attendant consumerism has perhaps become the most powerful of the kingdoms that exist alongside the kingdom of heaven. But what is the kingdom of heaven? It is none other than God’s realm, and how may we describe it? I can think of no better description than the images in the hymn *O For a World*, which we have been singing quite often at NCC. The realm of God is a realm in which “everyone respects each other’s ways, where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise.” It is a realm “where goods are shared and misery relieved, where truth is spoken, children spared, equality achieved.” It is a realm where “the poor are rich, the weak are strong, the foolish ones are wise.” It is a realm where outcasts belong,” and “who perishes will rise,” where peace reigns, and “where time and tears will be no more, and all but love will cease.”

There we have it. This is the kingdom of heaven for which we long each time we pray The Lord’s Prayer. This is the kingdom, the realm, which must be our highest good, the most precious pearl and treasure we can seek out and by God’s grace, receive and live by. This is the kingdom that may appear to others as a wild weed, the seed of which is sewn by God and aided by us in a world dominated by the power of materialism and consumerism. Yet, we believe that this wild, uncontrollable weed, not unlike an untamed mustard plant, will be the world’s salvation.

O God, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” May the kingdom of heaven more and more come to be present in our lives and in the life of our world. May it be so. Amen.

1. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (London: W. Heinmann, 1938), 529-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004),129.. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)