

## **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

### **What the Kingdom of Heaven Demands**

#### **Proper 12**

**July 30, 2023**

#### **St. Mary the Virgin**

#### **Peter R. Powell**

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "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."

He told them another parable: "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."

"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.

"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 but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

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The Gospel this morning is about judgment. I will be talking a lot about judgment. Let me start by defining judgment. Judgment means that you and I are important. What we do matters to God. If there is no judgment then our lives are meaningless since what we do doesn't matter. Regardless of your idea of eternal life, judgment gives you a role in living this life as we work to transform this world into being like heaven, as we will say later in the Mass in the Lord's Prayer: *Thy Will Be Done On Earth, As It Is In Heaven.*

Forgiveness and absolution absolutely exist and make it possible for us to start over, but even the sacrament of reconciliation assumes we need to be reconciled from something. So, if you can, keep an open mind for the next several minutes, as I talk about judgment. I firmly believe that judgment is good news primarily because it acknowledges that my life is meaningful.

One more caveat. Personal behavior is of course important and I do not want to minimize it. We can sin as individuals. But as I read the bible the greater judgment is on how we act as a people. The sins I believe this text refers to are our sins that further poverty, discrimination, violence, inequality, and many others. We are learning about the Kingdom in these parables. Moral behavior is expected; bringing in a transformed humanity is the point.

My final introductory point is that I'm not commenting on where anyone ends up for all eternity. My focus is entirely on bringing the kingdom into the life we live now. As I read the bible that is the primary point of a faithful life.

The separation of the good fish from the junk fish is a reference to judgment but Matthew wanted to make the reference clearer. He wanted us to know that our decision for or against the Kingdom has consequences. It's not a neutral choice. It's not a choice that we can make in a small way. These parables are meant to drive home the sacrificial and total commitment we as Christians are to have to the Kingdom of Heaven, if we wish to be included in it.

This is not an Episcopalian way of doing things, of course. I am a member of several Facebook groups for Episcopalians. This week one of them brought up again Robin Williams' list of 10 things good about being an Episcopalian. Members of the group were asked to contribute phrases on how they describe us. Every post talked about how much we drink. Not one referred to our commitment to the Gospel. I'm told that I trivialize the point by saying that our only sin is to be tacky. But I'm reminded repeatedly that it is the way we see ourselves. To further make this point, when you look at the list of ten things that define being an Episcopalian, which lives on Facebook, the list leads off with No Snake Handling and another is Free Wine on Sunday.<sup>1</sup>

This section of parables starts off very positively and will make us feel good. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that when planted, sprouts into a bush that can accommodate a flock of birds. So, the Kingdom of Heaven has room for all of us and that is good news.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a measure of yeast. We don't know how it works (actually some of us probably do) but it works to leaven the bread. We can all buy this. It's a nice parable. But I think that parables exist to make us uncomfortable so let me push on the niceness. If the yeast is in us then it is meant to transform us and not we the yeast. There should be a visible sign that the yeast has conformed us to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. Someone finds the treasure and sells all that they have to purchase the field to possess the treasure and be enriched. Sounds good until we examine the ethics of this passage. Suppose I found the treasure in your field and didn't tell you about it but instead bought the field from you and exploited the treasure. Are you a fool for not knowing it was there or am I dishonest for not informing you of the treasure in your field? The parable is morally troubling. Could Jesus have told a morally compromised story and used it as a positive example? Apparently he could. We've heard the story so many times that we don't notice the moral compromise, but it's there. What do we do with it? The parables not only exist to make us uncomfortable but to make us talk about issues of justice<sup>2</sup>. I cannot make this parable nice. The original owner of the field sustains a loss. Clearly the new

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<sup>1</sup> The list was created by Robin Williams: <http://www.clergyconfidential.com/2014/07/more-top-10-reasons-to-be-episcopalian.html>. The list has been online for years but this past Wednesday I made the mistake of commenting on it in a post on Facebook. The reaction reminded me of why I generally do not comment on Facebook. I invited those who disliked my comment to listen to the Sermon online on Sunday. That led to further comments which I'm ignoring.

<sup>2</sup> In the most recent issue of *The Christian Century*, August 2023, Jonathan Tran in an article "Getting Justice and Getting it Right" appeals to Stanley Hauerwas's *The Peaceable Kingdom* in which Hauerwas rejects the concept of Justice in favor of Peace. I'm intrigued but haven't internalized the argument sufficiently to make it here. I'll have to reread Hauerwas.

owner knew the value of the prize and he was willing to do anything to get it. How then ought we to behave? I'll have to leave that as a question for now.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a fine pearl, which a merchant discovers and sells all that he has to possess. No one is defrauded in this parable. But the importance of devoting one's entire self to the Kingdom is affirmed.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea. We have known for years about the harm tuna fleets have caused to dolphins and turtles drowned in the nets. So, imagine the net as an indiscriminating force drawing all of us in, but only some of us are keepers, while others of us are cast aside. Who are the keepers and who are those cast aside? The preceding parables make this clear. Those who are kept are those who show signs of having been leavened, of having sold all that they have to purchase the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price.

So, what does this have to do with you and me?

The Gospel tells us frequently that Jesus has a preference for the poor. This preference is not due to any virtue on the part of the poor but it is based on the innocence of the poor. They have no delusion that they are in control. The Gospel tells us clearly that if we want to be on the side of the Kingdom of Heaven then we must care for the poor. If we read on into the Gospel to Matthew 25, we find:

37 The righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

We are challenged to see how we treat the poor as how we show that we are leavened or willing to sell all that we have to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. How are we doing?

Christianity is not doing well. A conservative friend of mine is a notional Catholic. His employer, a successful developer in Connecticut and a convicted felon for tax fraud, is a dominant member of a Catholic church near me. He gives \$500,000/year to the church. The pastor retired and a religious priest was sent to function in the parish until a new pastor was appointed. My friend's developer, wealthy, convicted felon and current employer was troubled by the sermons of the interim; he didn't like being told how to treat the poor. So, he told the interim pastor that if he didn't change his preaching, or leave the parish, then the consequence would be no more \$500k annual contributions. My friend thought this was the right thing to say since the church exists to support its members. This is a notorious example of getting it wrong but it happens frequently. Who are we hostage to? Large donors or the Gospel? Only one promises us that the burden is light.

I devoted much of my life to working with the homeless, or as we are encouraged to say to describe them more accurately, the unhoused, so I have strong opinions about what it takes to seriously carry out mission. All too often we act as if the primary commandment is "God helps he who helps himself" which is used to excuse cutting outreach budgets. The first sermon I ever

preached to a congregation, in the fall of 1974, cited this text, “God helps he who helps himself”, as the theme of my sermon. After the sermon I met with my supervisor, the Rector of the Church<sup>3</sup>, for his reaction to my sermon. It was well received by the congregation and I expected him to congratulate me on a job well done. Instead, he asked me where in the bible this text occurs? When I entered seminary in 1973 as a cradle Episcopalian, I had never read the bible and I expected that I would leave seminary without ever reading it. I knew my way around the 28 BCP and the Liturgies for Trial Use, so the bible seemed, in my lifetime as an Episcopalian, to be unnecessary and too outdated and dry to be worth studying. So, in September 1974 I was ignorant of the bible. I told him that I thought it occurred in Romans. He asked me where? I went home, read Romans, and couldn’t find it. When I went back to him, he referred me to *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, this was decades before google, where I found that Ben Franklin is the source. It is indeed as I’ve learned since, antithetical to the Gospel. Congregations excuse their lack of financial support of issues of poverty, by saying that they must be good stewards of their money. Or they say “we must look after our own first.” This too is lacking in the bible and indeed is totally contrary to the sense of the bible. Helping myself means that we give out of our excess and if we have no excess we don’t give. The Gospels do not expect us to give charity, that is, to give from our excess, but instead to give of our substance. Of course, our society tells us that this is unreasonable and therefore we don’t take the Gospel seriously.

Jesus is clear in Matthew that if we want to encounter him and have a life with meaning then we find him unified with the poor, sick, refugees and those in prison. Any other place we look for him might give us comfort but it will not give us Jesus. Only in Christ do we find out who and whose we are. In other words, are we Christian first and everything else second or are we practical, pragmatic and success oriented in which case we are Christian when it is convenient? Meaning lies with Christ first. In recent weeks the Gospels talked about how we are the church without much that had overt political implications. Each week I was able to conclude with a statement that our faith should give us joy<sup>4</sup>. We should enjoy our Christianity. This week Matthew tells us what that means. It means that you and I have been given a gift and the only way to keep that gift is to give it away and not simply agree that it should be shared but to share it. Joy comes with being the church with those who are vulnerable.

While this morning’s Gospel clearly talks of harsh judgment, Christianity as I understand it is about opportunity, not loss and fear. We are called to live according to Matthew 25, to care for the sick, suffering, weak, hungry, imprisoned and refugees not so that we can lead a grim life but so that we will find a life with meaning and joy. I loved the work I did for 22 years and I enjoyed my clients. We are the church when we join with Christ in being one with the powerless.

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. William Opel, D.Ed., Sometime Rector of St. John’s Broadcreek, MD

<sup>4</sup> If you missed any of those sermons and would like to read them, send me an email. I preached them at Christ Church, Pelham.

The parable begins with the image of a mustard seed and bush. The bush can accommodate many birds. The reading ends with the separation of the good and bad fish and the reality of judgment. Joy is found in realizing that judgment is good news. It means our lives are important. So, with joy we live to bring life to those who are poor and we become the ones who live in this world in peace. We live in the confidence of resting in the only thing which gives our lives meaning.