

## **“Metaphors for God’s Realm” – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – July 26, 2020**

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As we return to Matthew’s gospel this week, we find Jesus moving away from his longer story-telling in the form of parables, to sharing a collection of five metaphors. Jesus uses these metaphors to describe what God’s Realm would be like when it is fully realized. Again, he uses images that would be extremely familiar to the first century crowds. But perhaps not so much to us, because we live in a different context. Surprisingly, uses mundane, everyday images to describe how this world would look if God’s hope for humanity became reality.

We may wonder how a tiny mustard seed, a bit of yeast, a hidden treasure, a persistent merchant, a large catch of good fish could possibly mirror the full expectation of God’s ideal world for us. And it seems strange to us, because we have been lulled into believing the “fake news” of our consumer culture. In Western society we are taught from childhood to pursue success in the form of wealth, possessions, a good job, and a tidy nest egg for retirement, especially people who fit the image of societal norms – white, middle class, cis-gendered, straight, married, with kids, a dog and a cozy home in a good neighborhood. If you don’t fit those categories, the striving for this successful image is still ingrained, though the reality is, it is much harder to attain.

As we progress in our faith journey of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, these images of God’s realm require us to take a hard look at where we stand in God’s overall picture of equality, compassion, love, and respect for all people. As we follow Christ, we learn that when we put the image of God’s kingdom first, the worldly desires lose their hold over us. Yet we know that it can be difficult to break free of patterns that we have been living throughout our lives. All we have to do is look around us to see that that is true. This pandemic has forced all of us to change our lives in significant ways. And we do not like it. The thing I hear the most from people is this – I can’t wait until things get back to normal. The reality is, we changed our lives because we had to. And for the most part, we’ve been making it work as best we can. It’s been difficult, and we are weary. It was a major change into which we were forced.

But when we examine these metaphors of God’s kingdom realized, or what God’s realm is meant to look like, we don’t see this as all or nothing, right now type of change. That’s not the way God generally works. Now, for the sake of speculation, could God have chosen to just zap us all into submission and be done with our willful natures? Perhaps. Instead, in Jesus, God is revealed as a God of love who does not coerce God’s beloved, but invites us into a better way of living. We enter God’s realm by invitation not coercion.

In the mustard seed, we find something so tiny becoming a very large bush that provides a safe home for the birds. We see growth from something so small to something quite large. The kingdom of heaven is introduced into the world by people who knowingly sow the seed,

and it grows exponentially. But that's not all. A thing about the mustard plant. It's not something that 1<sup>st</sup> century farmers would knowingly plant. Remember last week when I talked about invasive plants taking over? That's the mustard plant. The kingdom of God, begins in us as we sow tiny seeds of compassion and love into the world around us, those small efforts will take root and keep growing until it eventually will take over the whole field and beyond, pushing out things like hatred and aggression.

Then Jesus talks about the yeast as a metaphor for the realm of God, the kingdom of heaven. A small dab of a leavening agent, added by a woman into a batch of bread dough. Though it is small, by introducing it into the dough, and then after she kneads it throughout the dough, the bit of yeast will impact and entirely change the whole mix.

Then the kingdom is like an unexpected treasure found in a field. A person discovers the treasure and is so overwhelmed with joy in finding it, they are willing to sell and give up everything so that they may have the treasure in their life. And in a similar way, the kingdom is like a merchant who has been continually searching for pearls, hoping to discover one that outvalues every other. He is persistent in his search, and when he finally comes across the perfect pearl, he sells everything for it. When the immense of God's vision for our world is discovered, we want to get rid of everything that keeps us away from it.

And then finally Jesus compares the Realm of God to a simple net, tossed into the sea by fisherfolk. They kept throwing it out, into the water, catching scores of different fish, until finally the net is full. They draw it and sort through their bounty, keeping that which is good, and discarding the bad.

Jesus uses these simple, everyday images to emphasize that God's realm is everywhere around us, in the most mundane places, waiting to be discovered, waiting to be sown into the fields, like a dab of yeast affecting every bit of dough it touches, like persistent people scouring fields and searching their entire lives for that which is better than everything else, then giving up everything to have it, like the work of disciples, called by Jesus to fish for people and spread the good news of his gospel. The kingdom can be found anywhere, but in these metaphors, we see that we human beings are active participants in realizing God's plan. Through our work, our persistence, our willingness to change our lives for something better, we help to bring the goodness of God's realm to light.