

July 26, 2020 Pentecost 8A  
Matthew 13:44-52  
What We Overlook

Back in the early 1980's, a group of oenologists (people engaged in the study of wine and wine making) were testing soil to find the best places in the country for making wine. They were looking for a certain type of soil with certain nutrients combined with climate and a number of other things. One of the things they discovered was that downtown Memphis, Tennessee was built on land that was perfect for growing wine. Obviously they couldn't tear down downtown Memphis to plant a vineyard (though there are probably many who wouldn't have objected), but they found some similar soil outside of Memphis in what was unused pasture and woodlands. They planted a vineyard there called Cordova Cellars.

This was before I was a pastor and was in the graphic arts business and because I helped design the labels for their bottles and stationary, I was invited to their grand opening. And it was beautiful—straight row after straight row of grapevines with trails and benches all around, in what used to be unused pasture and woodlands. Something beautiful sprung up out of something not real useful or valuable and it was given new value.

This reminds me of the kingdom of God. Before we get into the three parables about the kingdom of heaven that Jesus tells in today's Gospel, take, for example, the parable of the mustard seed that Matthew records later. It is also about the kingdom of heaven. What we may not know today, but what the early listeners would have most likely understood, is that the mustard plant is a weed that grows like a bush and spreads. It's a very invasive weed. Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a plant that will constantly and inevitably keep growing and spreading. Have you ever seen ivy on an old house, taking it over completely? Now there's a visual. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

But that's the endgame. Jesus' point is that the beginnings of the Kingdom are tiny. The Kingdom of God starts small and unnoticeable. But when the

Kingdom comes into its own, it is everywhere, and you can't miss it. We are part of that growth, part of that kingdom, whether anyone recognizes us for what we are or not. The most important thing is that God knows. Jesus does not stop there in our gospel lesson today. He gives even more parables – more stories of ordinary things that possibly have extraordinary meanings. Parables like these should be wrestled with.

In his book "The Parables of the Kingdom," C.H. Dodd wrote:

"At its simplest, a parable is a metaphor or simile, drawn from nature or the 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."

So, what else do our parables tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? It says in the gospel that it is like yeast that a woman mixes with flour to make huge amounts of dough – enough for an entire wedding feast. In Jesus' time, leavening was something that people understood in scripture as unclean or evil. Unlike the convenient packets of dried yeast we have today, leavening was done by letting some bread rot just enough in order to leaven a new batch of ingredients. The Kingdom of Heaven is being modeled after something that is seen as unwanted or unusable in everyday life. And yet, God makes it good.

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a treasure hidden in a field that makes a person sell all they have in order to buy the field that the treasure is in. It is like a pearl of great price that makes the merchant sell all he had in order to have just that one pearl. How valuable is the Kingdom of Heaven? What would you give up everything to possess? Would possession be worth the sacrifice?

The Kingdom of Heaven in your part of God's vineyard is like ... . You fill in the blank.

What is valuable in God's Kingdom, others may see as junk. How often do we buy into the attitude that on Sundays we carry Jesus in our pocket and

take him out for a while, only to put him back in as soon as we leave the parking lot? We get settled in our daily lives the rest of the week and forget whom it is we follow. We might think, "Oh I'm just part of a little church. We can't do much, so why bother?"

As Lou F. McNeil in his essay on Christianity in Appalachia puts it, "When one's thinking begins with the parish and its members, rather than the gospel itself, it is likely that ministry and planning will not get beyond the parish and its membership."

Why bother indeed? Except that God bothers. Then God asks us to bother more than we want.

Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom starts out small like a mustard seed and grows into a tree that shelters and nurtures life around it. When that small mustard seed starts growing, it has an advantage, because it can grow in and around the landscape, sheltering those beneath it and giving a place to perch for those above it. This, too, is how the gospel is spread in neighborhoods where churches discern which leaf to unfurl in their present landscape. A little branch here, a little branch there, and suddenly the place is alive with people in the neighborhood being nurtured by the spread of the gospel.

God's gifts are unexpected, but they are so vast that they require a response. Do we give up our self-centered attitudes and everything else for the Good News of the gospel? That's a question that will take a lifetime to answer and is easier said than done.

Sometimes we don't know what to do with the section of God's Kingdom that we've been given. Even right now, we are in flux – we don't know what the future holds for the church. But even in that unknowing, we have an advocate – the Holy Spirit – that helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. As Paul says in today's reading from his letter to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his

purpose." It might not look like what we think it should look like, but God knows better.

We must trust God. The God that uses what others think is unusable. The God that calls us to love others with reckless abandon. To be known by love...and live by faith... and be a voice of hope. By living this way, we become of what the Kingdom of Heaven is made.