

Saint John in the Wilderness Episcopal Church

Sermon by Dr. E.R. Haire, Jr.

July 26, 2020

Read: Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8: 26-39; and Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

There is a story about a French soldier who was found suffering from amnesia in the aftermath of World War I. When he was picked up at the railroad station, he looked at his questioners blankly and all he could say was,

“I don’t know who I am.”

Facial wounds disfigured and covered his face. To complicate matters, there were three families who claimed he belonged to them. One of the villagers took him to where two of these families lived in the small village. He was allowed to walk about by himself, to look and listen and smell and feel. But nothing seemed to bring his memory of life before the war back to him. Finally, he was taken to another near-by village. His steps quickened as he turned down a tiny side street. Something seemed familiar. He passed a tiny gate with a tidy garden of flowers and stopped abruptly. But nothing. He remembered nothing. They went to the door. The house was very dark inside. No one was home.

“I will never know who I am,” said the soldier. The villager who had been taking the young soldier from place to place had so hoped familiar surroundings would restore the young man’s memory. This was the last family that would claim him and they appeared to be gone, perhaps for good. As they passed through the gate and down the road, several men returning from work passed them on the way.

Most of the men filed by taking little or no notice of the villager and the disfigured soldier. But an old farmer stretched out his arms as he came toward the young man. In his father's arm, the smell of his skin, the smell of sweat against his straw hat, his touch and voice told the young soldier at last, he was home.

I find this story interesting and touching. It seems the soldier does more than discover his father. The soldier discovers who he is and, in the process, where he belongs.

The metaphor of finding and losing and discovery are important elements of the parables that Jesus speaks to us today. Jesus speaks of our discovering what was not expected in unexpected places— and small things like touching; smelling, hearing; having larger implications.

Jesus tells a cluster of parables this morning that reflect the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Mustard seeds, yeast, treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price, a wide fishing net are not in themselves the kingdom of heaven, but they point to it.

We often read the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast as a comparison of small beginnings, that end in large and impressive results. We like this because we live in a culture where we are trained to move from small to large, from a little to very big. This principle dominates our over achieving and consumerist culture.

It is startling to realize that in two of the parables, Jesus is using common and negative images found in the culture of his time— first-century Judaism. Mustard plants were seen mostly as weeds, and yeast was an item physically removed from Jewish homes at Passover, lest it leaven and thereby corrupt the unleavened bread of the celebration. The kingdom of which Jesus tells, can and does use the negative to lead us to the positive.

What then is Jesus actually saying about the kingdom of God to us this morning in these parables? What has been lost, what has been found? What needs to be removed? And what has yet to be discovered?

It would appear Jesus is challenging our religious assumptions, and that whatever the kingdom of God is— it will not neatly and conveniently fit into an overly simplified understanding of God and God's way in the world.

The kingdom of God will defy our expectations, and not unlike weeds or unwelcome yeast, the kingdom of God may offend us. And what is the kingdom's chief offense? Like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl that must be searched for, the kingdom of heaven will make demands on us— it will interrupt our cultural norms, cause a rearrangement of our priorities, and demand that we orient all aspects of who we are in this life toward the living God and God's will— not only for us— but for all of creation.

Through the use of parables, Jesus gives imagery to that mystery which is beyond our human words of expressing. Jesus also uses ordinary images (mustard seeds, fields, yeast, a fishing net), to say something about the extraordinary.

The kingdom of heaven is not just an event that will happen in the future. Because of the coming of Christ, it is a reality that each of us is building daily. Therefore, our consumerist culture and our warring nature are called into question. And like a net of fish that must be separated, both will be judged before God. Therefore, the building of the kingdom of heaven, which holds our true and final citizenship, is an urgent task and demands our attention.

If the Church is silent that there is a greater kingdom we must be fighting for, then we of all people are to be pitied... If today the Church and her leaders fail to remind us

that since Jesus, there is more to this life than competition and the accumulation of material wealth—if today the Church is content to become simply an echo of our earthly kingdoms and does not tell of the peaceable kingdom Jesus came to build, and his enlistment of all of us in the building of it— than we have failed the God who speaks to us in parables this morning. If we do not actively become builders of the peaceable kingdom, we have failed the God who speaks to us today of deeper truths, and of the mystery of his presence among us.

To what kingdom do we belong? And to which kingdom do we pledge our greatest loyalty? Because of Jesus— we value above all, life— and when death comes with his encompassing sickle and cuts down the young and lovely, we are stunned— and reminded of how precious and delicate all human life is.

This week, I have reflected upon how both goodness and crippling sin began as small things in my life and have grown into good, (like a mustard seed into a mustard shrub that provides a home for birds), or my sins, are just plain bad, (like rotten fish needing to be separated and thrown into the fire.)

Today Jesus calls us all to such personal reflection. I cannot speak for you, but my reflection shows me what is truly holy and what I value within myself, in my life, and also what needs to be repented for, and what needs to be separated and thrown away.

This can be painful reflection, painful in acknowledging where I have missed the mark, identifying those places deep within where I am wounded, vulnerable and sometimes, feel helpless; painful bittersweet remembrances of opportunities to love and forgive that I have lost— but also remembrances of God's amazing grace, love and tenderness, that have visited me and blessed me and broken my heart.

Jesus can and does take the negative in our lives and uses it to lead us to the positive and in so doing, we discover who we are and where we belong.

Now to be sure, there is a large contrast between a mustard seed and a mustard shrub. Yeast can mess up unleavened Passover bread, or it can be divided and placed in different measures of flour, and the multiple loaves it can yield are astounding.¹

Likewise, that which is small in us— our sin or our goodness— or our faith— can grow— and if we will only follow Jesus through the field of life, whether what is grown there is good or bad or both, we discover that with Jesus, we can go on— with Jesus, there is no telling what we may find.

The acknowledgment of Christ's presence with us is cause for hope in the midst of sin and joy even in the midst of our pain.

For as Saint Paul reminds us, we have been given the assurance, *“that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things past, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, (nothing we can do to ourselves, nothing that someone else can do to us), will ever, ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!”*²

This is the pearl of great price; this is the treasure worth giving up everything for. The treasure you seek, the assurance you long for is in the field called life, a life that we are together passing through at this sacred moment... a moment, that shall not pass our way again.... In this life, Christ Jesus offers the riches of the kingdom of God, to anyone and everyone who passes by.³ The kingdom of God is something that one must seek to

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, John Knox Press, 1993, pages 157.

² Romans 8: 26-39, NRSV, my paraphrase

³ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 27, No. 3 Year A, 1999, page 17. Willimon refers to “a great Scottish preacher” as the genesis for this metaphor of walking through a field on a well-worn path. I take

find, it cannot be acquired until it is found, it cannot be found until it is searched for. It cannot be searched for until we take that first step with Jesus.

It may seem incredible that in the field called your life, there is anything worth discovering or stopping to pick up. It may appear that all that is collected is dirt and filth. But below the surface, only partly obscured by our pain, our egos, our idiosyncrasies, our limitations and our sins, there inside of you, by the gift of your baptism, is the treasure of your life— none other than Jesus Christ dwelling within your own heart... The question you and I have to answer today is: are we willing to give up everything to find Jesus there?

Jesus is the treasure in the field of life, waiting to be discovered or rediscovered by us. Whether you accidentally stumble over him or diligently seek him, it is not the finding, but our overwhelming response to what we find, that Jesus is interested in.

Will Willimon once wrote: *“The price for the kingdom is the acknowledgment of our poverty, the complete yielding of ourselves to the one who has paid the price for our inheritance. Put all other prizes and priorities and pride at the curb to be hauled away, and cling fast to the One who gives life true value. Belong to this King, and the kingdom is yours.”*⁴

As you travel through the fields of life my friends, may you always walk in the full assurance that Jesus is walking with you. May we each discover who we are in Christ, and in the process, that we belong. May all of our lives point to the kingdom of God.

the metaphor and attempt to stress Jesus as not only our companion on the way, but the true treasure we seek.

⁴ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 27, No. 3 Year A, 1999, page 17.