

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2017
The Rev. Ellen Mills
St. Thomas Lutheran Church Bloomington, Indiana
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – Old and New Treasures

This morning, we have five parables, and then an ending which may bring meaning to all that went before. “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.” Jesus is in the midst of telling parables about the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom of heaven is what John the Baptist had declared to be coming near as he prepared the way for Jesus. Parables defy a single, simple meaning. They are complex, and are like puzzles for our minds.

Scribes were educated people, meaning that they could read and write, and they were considered experts in the law or scriptures. They were often challenged by Jesus. But here, Jesus refers to scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven, presumably the disciples. And the disciples have just assured Jesus that they have understood all that Jesus has told them. Jesus compares these scribes to a master who owns, and brings out treasures both old and new. And it does not say that only one type of treasure is valued. So there is a suggestion that both old and new are valuable, and that perhaps the new helps them understand the old. So let’s look at the parables that precede this.

There is the mustard seed. This is a very familiar parable that also occurs in slightly different words in Mark and Luke. Here in Matthew, this parable has a surprising twist. This tiny seed, which was considered a weed seed, has not just produced a large plant, it has become a tree. This is not only an exaggeration, it also connects with a meaningful image. Trees are very important in scripture. And this tree is attracting a variety of birds, which may be a reference to attracting a variety of people. So, we have familiar images of seeds and plants and trees, but Jesus puts a twist on them. A seed of no account, not only small but also weedy, has produced something large and of great consequence. This kingdom of heaven must be powerful, yet it begins very subtly. Something almost invisible grows to great effect.

Then we have the parable of the yeast. For us today, this is not shocking. Yeast is this inert stuff we buy in a packet or jar, and we add it to flour and water and make bread dough, and the bread rises and is eaten. Big deal. But again, Jesus is telling a slightly different story. First of all, we need to go back in time. This bread yeast was more like how friendship bread is made now. There was no dry yeast. To make bread rise, it required holding out a lump of dough from one batch until it got moldy, and then mixing that moldy lump with the flour and water. And three measures of flour may sound like cups to us, but these measures of flour would have provided enough to produce a hundred loaves. And then, there is that word "mix." That smooths out the translation. The meaning is really closer to "hide." This is an action of hiding a moldy lump among a large amount of ground grain. This small thing that was hidden, winds up transforming everything there. And we must not lose track of who has done this. A woman. This may seem perfectly reasonable to us, but women were rarely the subject of parables. Jesus seems to be up to something here. Something subversive.

And then we have a pair of similar parables. A man finds a treasure, and a pearl merchant has found a fine pearl. Both are stories of surprise and delight. We are not told how these events came about, but the result is not that the men came to possess something in addition to what they already had. Something previously unknown to them has appeared in their lives, and it exerts such a strong attraction on them, that they cannot rest until they have given up all that they had previously possessed in order to keep this new thing. It may be a wonderful thing that they have discovered, but it has totally overturned the life they were living. All of their possessions, or we could say all of their allegiances, were now examined and given up for this one new thing. Only one thing mattered.

And then one last parable that may sound a lot like the weeds and wheat from last week. A fishing net has captured not just a few fish, and not just what was intended, but everything in its way. The net will be brought in, and the contents examined and separated into piles of what is wanted and what is not. But there is no indication of what

might make some contents wanted or righteous, and others evil especially when this parable follows all the other parables of mystery and upset expectations. And this parable leads into the saying about the old and new treasure.

So what is Jesus up to here? He does not appear to be reassuring his disciples, or others, that everything they had learned before will remain intact. These are parables of things hidden coming to light, things considered of little value becoming large or powerful, things sorted by angels in a way that might surprise us. The kingdom of heaven does not seem to be the status quo of the empire they lived in. And not only is there a reference to old and new, every one of these parables involves change of some sort. Surprising growth from a tiny weed seed, transformative growth from a lump of moldy dough, lifechanging decisions when treasure appears, a sorting of everything that was caught in the net. I don't think these were told in order to affirm our complacency.

At times, I think we have become complacent with the shocking aspect of Jesus. We just assume that Jesus shocked the people of that time, but we are in the know, and now that we are Christians, we can just sit in the pews and feel comfortable. Really? It concerns me whenever I see the sacrificial and radical love of Jesus treated like something we can own or possess, rather than something that will totally change our lives. Jesus did, after all, say "Follow me" not "Worship me." And if we follow in his footsteps, then all of what he said and did becomes relevant to our lives today. And this old and new, this continuity and also seeing things in a new way, continue into our lives today. How do we follow Jesus in this world today? How do we stay open to what Jesus is saying now, and not just assume that we know everything, and that nothing will challenge how we live our lives? It concerns me every time I get a hint that we have tamed Jesus. We have cleaned Jesus up, and removed any whiff of subversion. We think bread mix. Add water, mix and bake. Jesus is talking about a moldy lump of dough hidden among a great amount of flour. There is something hidden and powerful and shocking happening in our midst, and it is the power of transforming love. And we are called to join in.

We are also called to discern what is the treasure or pearl of great price and respond to its call to leave everything else behind. Today we are all about getting more, owning more, adding one more activity, one more layer to our already over filled lives. The parables of the pearl and the treasure are parables of great simplicity. This one thing calls to us and demands that all else become lesser or fall away. Such radical simplicity is rare in our busy world. Solomon asked for the ability to discern between good and evil. Yet sometimes we are called to discern between good and the one thing that matters.

As T. S. Eliot wrote in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.
AMEN