

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES 2020



Evangelical Lutheran
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In Mission for Others

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Bishop Michael Pryse, Eastern Synod

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

During the brief few years of his public ministry, one thing Jesus never tired of describing was the kingdom of heaven; the reign of God. And Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom often came as contradiction to what his listeners expect or want to hear. They sought a new reign — a new kingdom — that would come to God's people in a big way; powerfully, decisively and quite deservedly! But, instead, Jesus persists in describing the kingdom using common imagery from everyday life, as a reality that comes slowly, unexpectedly and "most undeservedly!"

It's all about grace and the parables included in today's Gospel lesson are pictures that describe a kingdom of grace; a reign of grace. The tiny mustard seed grows into a tree that becomes a nesting place for the birds of the air! The birds didn't and couldn't do anything to make it happen. The seed — the kingdom — grew of its own volition and nature! It's pure grace!

Likewise the yeast — "the kingdom" — is mixed by a baker — "God" — into three measures of flour — "the world." Keep in mind that those three biblical measures are the equivalent of a bushel basket; 128 cups or 16 five-pound bags of flour! Furthermore, when the baker adds the 42 or so cups of water needed to make it come together, you are talking about 100 pounds of dough throughout which she needs to disburse the yeast! (This woman must've had forearms like Popeye!) But she does it. God kneads that dough until the yeast — the kingdom — is disbursed throughout the dough; until it's everywhere! That's the only way dough can become bread. The yeast breathes life into the loaf. It is a gift of grace.

Jesus then goes on to liken the kingdom to a great treasure that someone “found.” He didn’t earn it or make it. He “found it.” It’s a straight-up gift! And the finder considers it to be so valuable that he sells all his possessions in order to keep it. Likewise with a pearl merchant who “finds” one pearl of great value, perfect in size, composition and colour. It’s a once in a lifetime find. It’s grace; an amazing, wondrous and unexpected grace. Again, it is worth everything that he has!

Jesus concludes his kingdom riff by describing the kingdom as being like a net, the kind you drag through the sea. It catches fish of all kinds, seeming without any discrimination until the net is full. Good fish, bad fish; it makes no differences. They are all caught up in the kingdom. It’s a picture of God’s grace; about the amazing breadth and capacity of the reign of God!

And it is only then, after laying out these five parable pictures of this grace-steeped, grace-infused kingdom that Jesus finally turns to the question of what will happen in eternity, at the end of the age, when after the great resurrection, there is a time of judgement. And let’s be honest, that’s the place where most of us would prefer to begin the discussion of the kingdom! “Enough with these cryptic fables!” Finally we get the kind of “gun barrel justice” we would expect from any king worthy to wear a crown!

But don’t be so quick! Context always matters and we need to read these words recognizing that the rhetorical weight of Jesus’ whole discourse has to do with the graciousness and universal breadth of the reign of God. The kingdom is a free and undeserved gift that you can’t earn, create or manufacture. Therefore, inasmuch as God will one day provide judgement, we can assume and trust that this is a judge whose nature it is to acquit everyone, to free everyone.

The Scriptures do of course tell us that, sadly, there are some who will reject this kingdom and the reconciliation that God gifts to us through it. And the outcome of that choice is a self-judgement. And who could imagine a worse hell?

Episcopal theologian and author Robert Farrar Capon describes it this way; “the very hell of hell lies precisely in the fact that its inhabitants will be insisting on a perpetual rejection of an equally perpetual gift. It will be an eternal struggle to escape from the gift of a love that will never let them go.” Can you imagine a darker hell than that?

It has been said, and wisely so, that it is only by being little that we can ever discover anything that is big. To a small child everything seems big. Mom and Dad are like giants. You go to school for the first time and the place is huge! It’s only when you grow up that you come to see that mom and dad weren’t so big after all and that the vast school only had eight classrooms. When you are little, everything seems big. Likewise, in matters of faith, it’s only by being little that you can really imagine and experience those things that are big.

I think this is also a key point of the gospel. The kingdom that Jesus describes is always recognized from a perspective of smallness and humility; a perspective where the first become last and the last become first. And maybe the only way for us to start recognizing the reign that Jesus points toward, the only way for us to more fully experience God’s reign of grace; the kingdom of heaven; is by taking the risk making ourselves just a little bit smaller.

About 30 years ago Canadian author Douglas Coupland burst onto the literary scene with a novel whose title coined the now familiar term Generation X. In his follow-up short story collection entitled *Life After God*, Coupland describes the Gen-Xers as perhaps the first generation to experience a life without God. It reads as a lament for a generation that feels very much adrift but also carries prominent grace notes of hope!

Near the end of the book he tells a friend about an experience he had in Stanley Park in Vancouver “Did I ever tell you,” I said, “about the time last year in Stanley Park when Mark and I went rollerblading?” “No.” “There was this group of blind people, with white canes and everything; a CNIB tour or something. They heard us coming and they motioned for us to stop and we did. Then they handed Mark a camera and asked him to take their picture.” “Blind people?” “Exactly. But the strange thing was, they still believed in sight. In pictures.”

On the last page of the book Coupland shares a secret with us. He writes, “Now here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I

pray you are in a quiet room as you read these words. My secret is that I need God; that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind because I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”

Although he might use different words to describe it, Coupland has taken the first and most important step toward discovering the kingdom, a state of being of experience that proceeds, not from bigness and power, but from smallness and humility; a state that is found in recognizing our complete neediness and dependence upon the grace and love of the one who is the author and source of all of existence.

I believe that our world and its inhabitants have a deep desire to experience that kingdom today. Many of us know the emptiness and hollowness of the false gospels upon which dominate much of life today. The hunger for a new way of living is evident all around us. As blind as our world sometimes seems, as blind as we often are, I think that most of us still believe in pictures; in the possibility of a better way, a renewed world; a new kingdom.

This time of living through a pandemic has amplified the pangs of that hunger. It has prodded and inspired acts of kindness and generosity; a renewed care for and love for creation and community. The righteous appeals of anti-racism protesters around the world have pulled at our hearts and pricked our consciences. We long for something better. We hunger for and long to see and experience that life which is life indeed; life in its intended justness, fullness and abundance; life in the kingdom!

Today we are given an opportunity to renew our residency in that special kingdom whose embrace has come to us as a gift that is predicated fully and completely upon God’s grace; not upon what we have or don’t have; not on what we’ve done or not done. The kingdom is already within us and around us! God’s already given it! All we need to do is live it!

AMEN.