

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The Kingdom of Heaven is Near

The Youth of our church and their advisors have for the last several years run a yard sale for the benefit of summer youth trips. And that's good because Jesus loves yard sales. Piles are hauled in all week, then on Friday night everything is priced by hardworking volunteers. On Saturday morning people are knocking down the doors to find deals. Our unwanted items become coveted. Our trash becomes their treasure. If you sit quietly and listen you can hear people talk about the deals they are getting. I guess yard sales and garage sales are like that all over our country. They bring out the bargain hunter. E-bay is sort of the on line form of yard sales. You put your junk up for auction and people bid online and miraculously trash becomes cash. There is even a store in Crofton that will help you out.

Stories are told of course about people who get amazing deals at yard sales or on e-bay. One time an antique dealer bought an old film container for \$5 only to discover and unknown Charlie Chaplan movie which he sold for \$60,000. Imagine the joy he felt upon that sale. One time Philip Gura, an American literature professor, paid

\$481 for a photograph of poet Emily Dickinson. He recognized her.

The snapshot is only the second photo of Dickinson known to exist, which makes Gura's discovery priceless. Imagine his excitement.

Or how about the story of Maria Ariz, a nurse from New Jersey, who paid \$16 on eBay for a pair of jeans. When she wrote the seller to ask about other items, they fell in love, and have been married for seven years. Now that's a good deal - and Jesus loves it! Because Jesus loves yard sales

Seriously? How do we know? Well, Matthew chapter 13, with its parables about hidden treasures and pearls of great price, tells us so. A guy stumbles across a pile of treasure buried in a field. He's so taken with his discovery, so overwhelmed at its value, that he sells off every other item in his possession to purchase the land and make the treasure his own. You might call it sneaky, but Jesus says, "Nope. Heck of a deal." A merchant who makes her living pushing pearls, spends her days scouring the markets for the best of the best. After finally finding it, the woman, sells her business, mortgages her home and peddles her cars on Craig's list all to purchase a single, sparkling pearl. Jesus is all about the joy that comes from discovering something priceless while persuing the ordinary. In fact, for Jesus,

the greatest of such joys, the most magnificent of flea market finds, is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us that the very reign and rule of God, the loving and life-changing activity of God in heaven, has broken into our world and is available now. It's here to be discovered and embraced. Like a pristine Babe Ruth baseball card sitting in a shoebox at some grandmother's garage sale, the kingdom of heaven is found in unassuming places and encountered in unlikely ways and well worth the price.¹

Looking at these parables and looking at the words of Jesus we can say three things about Heaven. One, heaven is astounding. Heaven bowls you over with goodness. Two heaven is in the here and now as well as in the God future and that has implications for life. And three, heaven is not as we imagine, when we stumble on heaven we experience culture shock. And if we don't, it probably isn't heaven.

The traditional way to interpret this set of parables or one of the traditional ways is focus on that tiny mustard seed. We are not talking yellow in a jar mustard ground up large seeds. We are talking a different plant, one with the tiniest of seeds; a speck that floats in

¹ See Homiletics July August 2011 Issue – Jesus Loves a Good Deal

the wind, which can grow in practically no time at all from a weenie seedling, into a fifteen foot tree with leaves for shade and branches for birds' nests. There is an exponential grace in God's Kingdom which when planted multiplies into all manner of graces and blessings. Faith can be contagious and at times churches and people grow almost overnight. This theme of phenomenal growth from something small offers great encouragement for the church in every age. This perspective is backed up by the parable of the leaven, one little bit is enough to bake a hundred loaves of bread; enough for a wedding feast. We are called to never underestimate God's Spirit.

The reign of God, the life of faith may seem like sheer weakness, no more than an insignificant seed, but from small beginnings come great things. Sunday school for instance, was first started in England in the early 1800's to keep a group of children off the streets on Sundays while their parents recuperated at home from working 70 hours a week in the factories. The idea was to teach the children to read using the Bible. Soon all of England had Sunday Schools, then Christians around the world.

The second thing we want to say is that Jesus believed that Heaven was here and now as well as a special dimension and presence in the future. Like a candy bar Heaven is Now and Later. According to Matthew one of the first things Jesus does when he ends his period of fasting and praying in the wilderness, one of his first acts of ministry is to declare to the people “The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Jesus taught that heaven stretches across time and other barriers and touches our hearts and our lives now. When Jesus calls people to ministry, he calls them to work on establishing the Kingdom of Heaven now. When we share the Lord’s Supper we sit at table in the Kingdom of God. A lot of people think that heaven is a future only place and state but God has high hopes for the present.

If you had some time on your hands and you wanted to explore the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA; if you cracked open the section called Form of Government, right early and up front you would find a short section called the Six Great Ends of the Church, or the six purposes of the church. The proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Human kind, the Shelter nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the children of God, the maintenance of divine worship,

the preservation of the truth, the promotion of social righteousness, and the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. The church, the whole church and the church Ark and Dove is supposed to exhibit heaven to the world. People ought to be able to peek into these windows and see a little bit of God. People ought to be able to visit worship and taste a little heaven. Feeling no love? Something likely needs change. We Presbyterians believe that we need to work in partnership with God to establish heaven now. This is why Mission is central to the personality of the church; the world as a whole is a long way from heaven.

Rob Bell in his Book Love Wins writes this. “ It often appears that those who talk most about going to heaven when you die talk the least about bringing heaven to earth right now, as Jesus taught us to pray: “ Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” At the same time it often appears that those who talk the most about relieving suffering now talk the least about heaven when we die. Jesus teaches us to pursue the life of heaven now and also then, anticipating the day when heaven and earth are one.”²

Presbyterians are said by some to fall in the second category

² 2011 Harper One New York , NY Pages 45 and 46

focusing on heaven now. My sense is that we talk a lot about heaven in the future in our homes and in church; but when we speak to the public; we talk about the need to establish heaven now. We are after all committed to the poor, the downtrodden and the vulnerable and we call that work mission.

But as he often does, Jesus serves up these parables with a twist. It's Shake It Up Café. Heaven may not be what we imagine it to be. We need to take a reality check. We need to make sure that heaven for which we labor is the heaven that God intends to create. Let's take a look at Jesus' fascination with yard sales. How did that guy find buried treasure on that property anyway? What was he doing on someone else's property?

Let's say this coming Saturday you head off to a yard sale and you find a really fine purse for \$3.00. You love it. Or if you are a guy, you know your significant other will love it. You check out the inside to make sure all the pockets and zippers are in place and you find a wad of \$100.00 bills. Do you pay the \$3.00 and high tail it out of there or do you tell the owner, they left some cash in their purse? The guy in the parable just bought the land.

And what about the fact that in first century Israel leaven was considered putrid and dirty; and part of getting ready for Passover was getting all the leaven out of your house. And why would Jesus hold up a woman doing housework as an image for King God and royal heaven? And what about the fact that merchants in first century Israel were held in public esteem at about the same level as used car salespersons and telephone solicitors in our time? And what about the fact that this mustard seed that Jesus was waxing all poetic about was considered by farmers and gardeners a damnable weed that competed with crops? Darn seed was so small you never could find it to stop them.

These parables lift up convention subverting persons and situations; A trickster scoundrel, a stinking merchant, a lowly woman, a miserable weed. “whatever else they mean these parables hint that God’s empire and therefore good citizenship in God’s realm is fundamentally different from Rome’s.”³

Our Daughter Chelsea is serving the church in Nicaragua for nine weeks. She studied Spanish in High School and college. She studied abroad in Spain, she went on the Presbytery’s Mission trip to

³ Gary Peluso Verdend in Feasting on the Word year A volume 4, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville KY 2011

Guatemala when she was in High School; but none of these experiences prepared her for the deep culture shock she felt in her first three weeks in Managua, the poverty, no air conditioning, the culture, the dialect, the isolation. The experience was quit overwhelming and had parents pacing the floors. She has stuck with it and can see things she never saw before.

Perhaps these parables present a challenge to Christianity in the United States where the Christian faith is very often a middle class, convention supporting religion. Maybe we are out there sustaining and promoting values that suit us much more than God. Maybe we are out there propping up values that are more like the values of Rome than the values of Jesus? Biblical Scholar Warren Carter writes “If a person is well adjusted in a sick society, [then] corrupting is the only path to wholeness.”⁴

⁴ ibid Verdend quoting Warren Carter

Jesus all about Yard Sales?

Only to the extent that they help us realize what a treasure
the Kingdom of Heaven is,

the real Kingdom of Heaven,

the one that shakes and shocks,

the one that is better than the wants we want

the one God wants,

not our daydreams but God's.