

Pentecost 9-July 30, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Deuteronomy 7:6-8, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“The Kingdom of Heaven IS YOURS”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

How about you? Are you like the disciples who were asked, “Have you understood all this?” and be able to answer “Yes”. In today’s string of five parables, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven **is like** mustard seeds, bushes, birds, yeast, flour, hidden treasures, buying fields, merchants, pearls of great value, fishing nets, baskets of good fish and furnaces of fire. What is so difficult in understanding the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus was clearer when he told the parable of the sower and the wheat and the weeds when he explained what each character in the parable “is”. For example, Jesus said the seed **is** the word of God. The one who sowed good seed **is** the Son of Man. The birds that took away the seed or the one who sowed the weeds **is** the devil. In these five parables we just heard today, it seems that Jesus is now testing his disciples to see if they really understand what the kingdom of heaven is like, by comparing it to other things familiar to farmers and fishermen that resemble the kingdom. As we hear these stories about the kingdom of heaven, whenever there is the slightest opportunity for us to become one of the lead players in these parables, we want to audition for the part and believe we have a part to play in finding the kingdom of heaven and we dismiss the point of how we become a part of the kingdom of heaven.

In the parable of the treasure that is stumbled on and then hidden until the field is purchased and the parable of the fine pearl there is a game of hide and seek happening. Many newly self-proclaimed Christians described themselves as seekers of God and they proclaim their lives have been completely changed after they have found Jesus. So, it is not uncommon for people to find themselves in these parables as the ones who believe the treasure in the parable is the kingdom of heaven and the pearl of great value is also the kingdom of heaven that was found by them, and they are willing to pay whatever cost is required to keep this wonderful treasure. If these parables are about you and me, do you know anyone who has given away everything they had to follow Jesus. I don’t know of anyone who has trusted that Jesus would provide shelter and food for them if they gave away half of what they owned. In these parables, there is a difference between what **is** and what something **is like**.

Kim and I had the opportunity to take a trip to Mexico several years ago. The meals that we had at our resort were excellent. The food that we were served was very much like the traditional foods that I prefer and enjoy, and we were used to in the Midwest. There was a large buffet meal provided for us the last night of our stay and my appetite matched the size of the buffet. Several meat, chicken, and fish options were available, along with salads of all kinds and to tie everything together on the buffet was one of my favorites. Mashed potatoes and gravy. If there is a smorgasbord in heaven, I could imagine it looking like this. As I finished going through the buffet, I loaded up the empty space I had remaining on my plate with this Midwest delicacy of potatoes and gravy. I looked wonderful. I noticed that it had a little different aroma that I was used to, but I thought, we are in Mexico and not everything is like at home. Good potatoes are almost a dessert for me, so after I had tasted the meats, I mixed a sampling of potatoes and gravy on my fork, and it was not what I expected. Kim might have understood what I had done, but let me do it anyway, just to see my response. She wanted to see if I understood what I had filled my plate with. Of course, I didn’t want to be ignorant, so I said, “I understood what I was eating”. That was until I was informed that I had filled my plate with mashed cauliflower. I was told it is like potatoes. But being “like potatoes” was not good enough for me.

There is nothing more troubling than uncertainty. From that time that I was fooled into believing mashed cauliflower was like mashed potatoes, I take extreme caution in putting on my plate what only appears to be potatoes. In all the readings for today, we learn how to be certain that the kingdom of heaven is for you. We have this assurance when we have been chosen and called by God himself. It doesn't matter whether you are looking at stories in the Old Testament or New Testament, there is only one way for you to be certain that you have been chosen by God. He will speak and tell you. The Israelites apparently had forgotten the promise that was given and repeated to Abraham many times that he would be chosen to be the father of a great nation. They started to believe that it was because of the size of their nation that they were chosen. Instead, they were told by Moses that it wasn't because of their size that they were chosen, but because they were loved by God. They had received a promise. Abraham wasn't chosen to be the father of many nations because of anything he had to offer. His inability to reproduce proved that. This is the way being chosen by God always happens in the bible and for everyone today. Moses and Aaron had no resume to suggest that they would be great leaders. If David was a man after God's own heart, he certainly didn't act that way. Jonah wasn't chosen by God because he was a preacher that he could depend on since he headed the wrong way to go to the congregation the Lord told him to preach to. If Paul had completely put away his past, why was there still a thorn of some kind that festered in him. There is no one in scripture that had credentials deserving to be chosen by God to serve him. But everyone that God chose to follow and serve him also received an unmistakable call by God.

In the reading from Romans, being chosen by God ahead of when you think your time has arrived is called predestination. Predestination is when God has chosen to call you. This doctrine of predestination has caused synods and denominations to break apart and merge and form new churches throughout history. There has often been disagreement on what it means to be chosen and called by God. That is why it is reasonable to doubt the 12 disciples who all said, "Yes we understand the parables of the kingdom of heaven". But once again the kingdom of heaven did not depend on their understanding but was given to them and they would soon be sent out to share what it means to belong to the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom of heaven is just not a place where you will go when you die, but the kingdom of heaven is the reign of God and it is yours today.

I don't understand why you and I have been chosen to be children of God any more than I understand why Jesus chose people like Abraham, Moses, Aaron, David, Jonah, or Paul. However, in these parables about the kingdom of heaven, I am reminded again that Jesus was not looking for a certain kind of treasure when he stumbled upon you. Jesus stumbled on you and chose to purchase you with everything that he had to give. Now as a child of God there is no one that can condemn us and there is nothing that you can do or can be done to you that can separate you from God's love.

You have not been left in uncertainty by being chosen by God. You have also been called. You have been called by name in the waters of baptism. You have been called to the table of the Lord's supper to receive the forgiveness of sins. You have been called to this place today to hear about the kingdom of heaven which is like nothing else you will ever know. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Amen