

Proper 12A; 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 7.30.23

### **1 Kings 3:5-12**

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.” And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.

### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “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.” (538)

Still with the parables. Week three with the parables. This week, a bonanza of them—five staccato notes about one of the great mysteries of life and what animates it and what lies beyond it,

if also entangled amidst it, in the realm of the one who created it and now permeates it: the kingdom of heaven.

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus concluded this bonanza of teaching, asking this of his disciples. “Have you understood all this?”

They answered, “Yes.”

I don’t really believe them.

Because understanding isn’t really the point of parables. Un-understanding is, an undoing of the understanding.

For his part, Jesus, in various places, takes time to explain why he teaches in parables. And even these teachings, about why he teaches in this manner, are puzzling. He uses parables so those who think they know come to realize they don’t know, so those who think they see come to realize their sight is blindness. He teaches in parables, he says, because many are the people who, “seeing, they do not perceive, and hearing, they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

This un-understanding, this newly perceiving that which can be otherwise imperceptible: this seems especially Jesus’ aim when it comes to the first two parables of these five he told. The mustard seed; the mixed-in yeast. Both operate in a way hidden, but then end up transforming a whole environment. You can hardly perceive it, until as of a sudden, it’s all you can perceive.

A mustard seed gives way to a mustard plant that, though technically a shrub, can grow in some cases as tall as a tree, as much as twelve feet tall. And once mustard is planted, it’s insistent, growing quickly, shooting up as if not to be overshadowed by other plants. What’s more, once it’s planted it’s not at all easy to root out. Once mustard finds some soil in which to take root, it basically owns the territory.

How is this like the kingdom of heaven in our midst, I wonder? Because, doesn’t it seem that some people act as if the works of God are far less hearty, need in fact to be defended? As if the world, the so-called secular world, might actually prevail against the reign of God, making the task of the faithful to be defenders of that reign, defenders of the realm? You listen to some people talk and it’s like the kingdom of heaven is as when a damsel is in distress.

But mustard is quite a bit heartier than that. Yeast operates in flour in a similar way. Once mixed in, it can’t be removed. And the effect it has is holistic. Though in much smaller measure than the flour you mix it with, it leaves none of the flour unaffected. It makes the whole thing utterly different, and quite a bit better. Unleavened bread is harder to eat than leavened bread, the dense texture making it brittle which though becomes like paste in your mouth.

And, of course, it's important in the religious life of Jews, but as a commemoration for when their survival was on the line and there was no time to waste. It was the bread they resorted to when, now to escape Pharaoh's army, they had no time to wait for the rise, for yeast does (it should be said) take some time. It was the bread you resorted to when you had no other options, and it became, ceremonially, the bread for remembering such times as that—which makes leavened bread something more of joy, something more of relief. The kingdom of God.

Interesting, don't you think, that in speaking of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus calls to our attention the things of this world, very much the stuff of this world. Because wouldn't you have thought that heaven is to be found in the above and beyond?

At camp a couple weeks ago, a UCC Outdoor Ministry site where I was a volunteer for a week, one of the campers, an 11-year-old I'd guess, sidled up to me at lunchtime when we'd reached the destination of our day hike on a lower trail on Mount Washington. Tuckerman's Ravine was above us, a curved wall of green and narrow water falls that hemmed us in on three sides—awesome! He sidled up to me, this boy, and asked, "Where do you think heaven is?"

I took a beat, wondered where this boy's starting point was. "I think it's a realm, an experience. Not a place like places we know—like up or down or here or there. What do you think it is?" I asked him, not really dodging the question, just figuring it's often more useful to listen and respond than to take the lead.

"Well, I know it's not in the sky," he said—which seemed like there'd been some progress. Like once he thought it was in the sky, but now he knows a little better.

Funny that the more complex your thinking becomes about the kingdom of heaven, the more lodged it feels to be in the stuff of this world, or at least *as* the stuff of this world. The move from the abstract to the material: this reflects maturity, complexity of imagination, as if there's something stubbornly real about God and God's reign.

Jesus, in speaking of the kingdom of heaven, trains his attention on, and turns our attention to, stuff very much of the here and now, which itself suggests something unexpected.

Can you perceive such a presence in the world, such an action?

Then there's the value of the thing so perceived, the value of this presence, of this irreversible, irrepressible, transformative action. A treasure hidden in a field, though which someone found. And when he found it, he hid it again, maybe in that same field, and then went and sold everything he had so he could buy that field—the treasure buried there making the whole

field worth that much more, the treasure in one spot making the whole field worth so much more, everything he had.

Where is that field now? In the world, where is such a field made suddenly more valuable for what's been buried within it now?

Like, this church sanctuary. Is this church sanctuary worth more than other buildings of its size? Is it worth more than other buildings of its age or building materials? What if I told you this building were valued at \$100,000 or \$200,000? Does that seem equal to its worth in the world? And if it seems like it should be valued higher, why is that? What's here that might make it of higher value?

Just wondering.

There are a lot of ways to wonder about where this field might be, and what fields lacking such treasure might also be, places where there is nothing of leavening, of lightening or enriching, fields where there's just work to be done, toil, stultifying toil. Just spit-balling here—that there are places so filled with some strange significance that we can hardly name it but can (if barely) perceive it, while there are other places that seem a bulwark against such significance, such leavening, such enriching significance. Just shut up and go about your business, okay?

I have a book, an academic study, that I read half of a few years ago, that it occurs to me in considering the parables I should return to, how hard the Soviets had to work to deplete the spirit from the sacred architecture of so much of Russia following the Revolution and the imposition of the totalitarian state. How hard they had to work to drain churches, for example, of anything that might call the human spirit to some higher plane! The book's title: *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*. The Soviets intended to put a roof on the world, and there would be no climbing on top of that roof to get an even better view of the stars. No transcendence. No transcendence allowed.

Draining sacred architecture of transcendence turns out it'd be easier to drain Florida's Everglades, incidentally another impossible thing that people seem to attempt every few decades. Otherwise, how will that weird, wet biome make us any money?

See, just to be fair, neoliberalism can manage to do something similar as the Soviets tried. The profit motive can be just as dispiriting as social engineering. It's not as intentional, but it can be just as effective.

So, you have to search for it: you have to search for this other mode, this other reign, the way a merchant of pearls might search for that one pearl to end all pearls. And when you find it,

when you find the thing that brings true worth to every earthly endeavor, you invest in it such that you have nothing left to invest anywhere else. You're all in with this thing, this precious thing that makes the otherwise toil of life simply come to nothing, this treasure you've found which redeems all toil, this treasure you found which turns inside out all heartbreak or backbreak or suffering or loss.

"What a waste," I've twice heard parents say about children who died young after suffering hard. "What a waste," two mothers have said to me as we've come to terms to plan the funeral, such funerals as no one ever wants to have to plan.

I think I've never personally heard anything worse—a bereft mother who, for a moment anyway, sees nothing of value in all her pouring out of trying, birthing, rearing, raising, blessing a child whose life comes to an end too soon.

Not that they shouldn't have said it, and not that shouldn't have felt it, just that my frequent prayer in their regard is that the pearl at the heart of their children's lives might come to encompass everything else that felt so hopeless and fruitless and irredeemable. "What a waste" transformed to even this becoming fulfilled of all the promise it ever held—which was so much.

We all hold so much promise. We each can't help but to disappoint—except for the kingdom of heaven among us, within us, above us, permeating everything, leaving nothing untouched. We'd all count as waste were it not for the reign of God among us and within us and urging us toward our true and enduring end of life in glory, thanks and praise, thanks and praise. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Meanwhile, meanwhile, there is life in the world, where the reign of heaven is to be manifest in the life of the church. As I said last week, when we considered another parable from this same gospel book, the Gospel of Mathew, his is the only to imagine such a thing as "church," the Greek word he alone used, *ekklesia* or assembly, gathering. He alone imagined an organized body of students of the Way, disciples so to say.

No other gospel writer quite imagined this, a world-wide institutional church.

And it was an image, and a charge, that provoked him to anxiety, a worry about what it might mean to gather with all types with only an aim in mind, that aim being Jesus, which is also a way. And it comes with no commandments but two—to love God and to enact love amidst the creation. And it comes with no given practices but two—to break bread together and to pray together what's come to be called the Lord's Prayer.

Which leaves a lot open to interpretation, about what we should doing together and how we should be doing it, about who's in and who's only sort of in and who is (come on, let's be serious) not in at all, no in fact rightfully, actually out. Because you can't have a gathering without an outer boundary, demarking who's in and who's out. Gathering are to be understood as much who's excluded as by who's let in. Otherwise, they just don't work.

So, yeah, how exactly will this work? A calling together of people of every type, Jew and Greek, pious and pagan, male and female, farmer and fisherman and soldier and midwife, children and the elderly, artists and intellectuals and laborers and infirmed. How exactly will this work?

The parables that address this anxiety might land on notes we don't like, the assurance that God will, at the end of the age, sort out the good from the bad, and that this sorting will end in much weeping and gnashing of teeth. This might strike us as punitive in a way that's untrue when it comes to God whose power to redeem outpaces our power to imagine.

I know I, for one, step back at this final word which Matthew's parables often speak.

I'm not looking for justice that comes with weeping and a gnashing of teeth—but that might because I've never been such a victim of *injustice* that I have a gut-level sense of what it will take to make all this right. Because establishing justice can't just a matter of God saying, "It's all good." Some of this is very much *not good*.

But that's not to say God's justice can't come of radical, universal redemption. It's just to say that the idea of redemption, of God's saving grace taking effect on everything that is and everything that has ever been and every event ever to have taken place in history and every turn of event that is sin or even evil: the idea of this utter and thorough redemption is a scandalous idea, and if we're not scandalized by it, if all that sounds okay with us, then we're not living with such closely felt injustice as many, if not most people, have lived with throughout human history.

Though, let it be said, it might also be the truth. God's saving grace which knows no limits: this, I do confess, is also the truth. It's just that this, God's truth, which might comes as facile in our well protected lives we should try instead to imagine as something with a measure more of ferocity, if such ferocity is ferocious love, ferociously redemptive love.

I don't know how that works. But I do know it will come as good to have my own wickedness burned off, my own petty darkness brought (if painfully) to light. Such redemption of my mixed-bag soul might even involve me to weep and gnash my teeth.

The hymn we'll sing in a moment is a favorite of mine, but it's always a risky choice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what has been arranged as its text, a poem he composed while imprisoned by the Nazis following when he was caught conspiring to have Hitler murdered.

Four months later he would himself be murdered, executed.

It's always a risky choice for inclusion in worship because it's more powerful as testimony than most Sunday mornings call for, particularly summer Sundays when the loveliness of life tends to be on full display. That roof that social regimes darkly aim to place over the world is nowhere to be found when it comes to God's blue sky, leafy trees, and wafting art as fills the Berkshires in summer. We don't need talk of evil days that bring burdens hard to bear, which we will sing together in but a moment.

On the other hand, the risk that is this hymn might be worth taking today because the parables of Jesus put us in the place of ferocious faithfulness, a foundational trust that the works of God, if largely hidden as of now, are also irrepressibly taking action, and where our sight that insists its otherwise is but blind to what we might better perceive—evil brought to right, sin brought to sanctification, peace come to bear even where conflict insists upon itself, and a folding into utter fulfillment everything that might though seem as waste and loss.

Have you understood all this? Or can you perhaps perceive this?

Try.

Today, try.

Thanks be to God.