

## “Similitudes”

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-50

Proper 12 A, Boise, 2020

In that last reading, we finished all but one of the parables presented in the 13th chapter of the First Gospel, having already spent two Sundays on them. The set we have before us today comprises what some scholars call “similitudes,” short analogies consisting of one or two sentences. Jesus, like His ancestor Solomon, was a wise man. But the wisdom He dispensed did not consist of proverbs on diverse and sundry matters. The wise sayings of Christ were all about the Kingdom, the Reign of God, which He administers as the Lord’s Anointed. We heard the lines addressed to God in the Psalm that was chanted, “The unfolding of Your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” [Ps 119: 130]. There is, in fact, only one thing that God’s People today simply must understand, and that is the Kingdom.

The similitudes, or short analogies, in our Gospel reading are five in number. They range over three topics, three distinct things we should know about God’s Reign through Christ, and so to cover them I really need to give you three different sermons. (I can now hear the groans arise from the pews, even if they are silent ones.) Well, I’ll begin with the last saying, because it makes the same point as the longer story we had for a parable last Sunday.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.

So there is your similitude, or analogy. It is a fishing analogy. “Fish of every kind” are gathered in a net and hauled to the shore. The men sorted through their catch and retained what they wanted, throwing the rest away. To what is such activity compared? What is the point of the analogy? As with the story about the wheat and the tares, Jesus tells us. It is His sermon; so He explains it. “At the end of

the age, the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous.” The evil persons they will “throw into the fiery furnace.” Hence, this is an analogy that depicts judgment. Under the Reign of God administered by His Son, people will continue to do bad things right up to the end of history. Then a division will be made. God’s agents, the angels, will, under Christ’s direction, sort the unrepentant from the men and women who do repent and change their ways. The latter will be retained; the former thrown into the fire.

That’s the first sermon. Not so bad, was it — at least in length? I didn’t do much; for, as I said, Christ Himself gave the meaning of that analogy. The Kingdom of God is not seen in its pureness in this time we live in now. The righteous must share the earth with the wicked, and even the Church is a mixed multitude. A lot of things won’t get sorted morally until “the end of the age.”

Now let us look at the two similitudes just before that last one, a pair that make the same point. One of them is the comparison of the Kingdom to “a treasure hid in a field,” and the other to a “pearl of great value.” Never mind the ethics of the man in the first illustration, who covers up the treasure he finds, and then buys the field from the owner who is ignorant of what he possesses. Most of Our Lord’s parables were designed to make just one point, and such is certainly the case in each of these short analogies we study today. Both the man stumbling upon a treasure in a field and the pearl merchant sell all that they have in order to purchase their discoveries. The Reign of God is offered to all as a gift, but, as Bonhoeffer explained in his famous book on the subject, the gift is costly because in accepting it one must reorder his or her entire life. The Kingdom of God’s free admission, as it turns out, is even more costly than the field and pearl in the illustrations, which required of their discoverers merely the sale of their house and other possessions to be able to afford. But, come now, if God came to us this hour and offered us the Kingdom for our life’s savings, would we not at least hesitate? Would I not ask whether I could retain possession of my house

and my Honda on a lease for as long as I needed them?

Here is the point: the nature of the Kingdom is such that it is not possible to receive it in just the way it is offered, as pure gift, without its costing us our lives. It cannot be balanced against other interests. It can't be taken in parts. It can't be entered on Sunday morning and then exited on Sunday afternoon, so that we are left free to go about our business in whatever way we please for the next six days. The Kingdom doesn't work like that. Either you're in or you're out. And when you're in, you're completely under God's government as administered by His Christ. The choice to accept or reject the Kingdom is a radical choice. The people protesting in the streets of Portland, Seattle, or our own city think they are engaged in something radical. Let me tell you what is truly radical. Our adjective "radical" derives from the Latin word for "root" — *radix*. When God comes to us with Good News, in either a sermon preached, a testimony given, or a Scripture read, and we have put before us, in a clear, unmistakable way, the offer of the Kingdom, the gift of living in His Reign, the choice we have to make is a truly radical one, because it goes to the root of our existence. Will we or will we not live under the Reign of God, the One who made us for Himself? Will we accept the Spirit's transformation that allows us to live that better life, as well as the pardon that God's Son won for us by His Sacrifice?

Such is offered, and you cannot in fact buy it as you might a field with hidden treasure or a valuable pearl. But it will nonetheless cost you your life, the manner of existence you were born with and began your life in. Do you really want that, and will you make that trade? That is what Our Lord is asking in these two similitudes of the man's finding a treasure in a field and the merchant's a pearl that he would give his life's saving to obtain. The Kingdom will make us rich beyond our wildest dreams. But we must let go of the life we have, the life we think we control, in order to receive it.

All right, that's the second sermon preached. We have one more to go.

What about these first two similitudes, the comparison of the Kingdom to “a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field,” and to the “leaven a woman took and hid in three measures of flour”? Those two analogies, it would seem, make a more gentle point about the Reign of God both in the lives of believers and in their society, the Church. Receiving the Kingdom may be a radical choice, and such choice will, in the end, determine what side of the Judgment we are on when the angels do their sorting, but once the choice is made to receive the Kingdom the effect will be borne out in time. When one is baptized and receives the grace of regeneration, the immediate effect can be so small as to be imperceptible — especially in the case of an infant, with belief pledged by parents or sponsors. But with the right spiritual nourishment, the seed that was planted, the leaven that was hid, will grow to the point that we can see the results. And so long as the little one’s faith is watered with the Spirit, by the means the Church provides, and the will is trained to cooperate with the Spirit’s promptings, it will continue to grow until it attains an impressive size.

And if there are many young plants that fulfill that promise, growing together and maturing to the point that they produce their own seeds, which in turn take root and grow, the eventual product is a mighty forest spread across the earth — interspersed with weeds, of course, but a forest nonetheless. As we noted in our study of the parable given in our reading last Sunday, the Church Militant on earth is the Kingdom of God in the making. Its members are growing spiritually and bringing forth the fruit of good works, and they are multiplying and spreading over the earth quantitatively. We see the result of the mustard seed’s bloom both in the spread of Christianity over the last two millennia and in its reach today even in places where the authorities are hostile and trying to suppress it.

Don’t lose heart when you encounter hostility in this country and see weeds sprouting in what you took to be the Kingdom. The roots that grew from Gospel seed formerly sown are still strong, a lot stronger than the weeds. They are interlaced throughout American soil, and they will bring forth another crop if we

expend a little effort in tending it.

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