

Lectionary Series A Pentecost 7 July 27, 2014
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN.
1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Do You Understand All This?

“Have you understood all this?” That’s what Jesus asked his disciples after this series of parables he just told—parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s like good seeds, and weeds, and mustard seeds, and flour and yeast, and treasure and pearls and fish.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered simply, *“Yes.”* I’m not disputing their answer, but—well, last week we heard Jesus tell us to *“Listen.”* It is one thing to really listen to what he is saying and another to understand all that he is telling us. If we look at these parables, we can see Jesus is using his tactics again to shock and throw unexpected angles on the subject.

Let’s take the first parable about the mustard seed. At first glance we see Jesus telling the disciples that heaven is like something tiny that grows great big. This is a nice picture of heaven, but the story does have a twist to it. In order to see the hidden meaning we need to know that a mustard plant is not a tree, it is a weed that grows quickly and takes over everything. And really never grows to be as big as a tree. Everyone he was talking to was very familiar with mustard seeds and could see the shocking aspects of this story.

First of all, I think it is interesting that after last week’s parable about the good seeds and the weeds that Jesus would use for his example of heaven, the seed of a weed.

Yes, Jesus is telling us the kingdom of heaven is like a tiny seed that grows into something very large. But there’s more. Is Jesus telling us the kingdom of heaven is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and can be uncomfortable? Is he saying the kingdom of heaven may bring us into contact with situations in which we would not voluntarily put ourselves—that we may find ourselves embracing ministry in places that never before seemed inviting, in fact, seemed uninviting? Could this parable be saying that God may put us right smack dab in the middle of the prickliest weed patches in this world to find glimpses of heaven?

And then what happens when that mustard seed matures? It *“becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”* Birds move in—all kinds of birds. They don’t just land on the branches for a little rest. They set up their homes in that mustard plant, feathers, bird noise, eggs, baby birds, and well, if you have ever felt a bird fly over your head, you know that what Jesus is describing as heaven could get kind of messy.

Maybe, if Jesus was telling this parable today, he would say the kingdom of heaven was like a Mimosa seed. When my dad moved down to Southern Indiana there was a mimosa tree in his back yard. I thought it was beautiful. We don’t have such “weeds” in central Indiana. We noticed that there were baby Mimosa trees growing all over the place. That should have been a red flag. But I took one of those baby trees home and planted it in my front yard. In just the matter of a few years it has grown to be forty or fifty feet high. And there are baby Mimosa’s sprouting up everywhere. If we aren’t vigilant about cutting them down, we could have a Mimosa forest on our hands.

But I do have to admit I think it is beautiful. And I enjoy watching all the birds, including hummingbirds, that come feed and live in that tree. Not to mention the butterflies and other insects that are attracted to it. Could heaven be like my Mimosa tree—wildly beautiful and attractive to all sorts of God’s creatures? In our attempts to control our lives, are we unintentionally cutting down, or missing opportunities to discover the kingdom of heaven?

I think Grace and Peace does a pretty good job of looking for the Mimosa forests, or mustard plants to seek God’s kingdom.

For us God’s kingdom of heaven shows up when we welcome all who come through our doors. Our welcoming statement printed in the bulletin tells it all.

I saw heaven earlier this year, when two young women came to visit and didn’t know what was going on. You guys reached out to them, sat with them, and showed them love, even though they looked and acted differently than we do.

I saw heaven when I shared at one of our prayer services that a man who had been homeless came to me at the mission. He asked if we had a coffee pot. Another agency, Aurora, had helped him get an apartment and he needed things to set up housekeeping. After that service I was given \$20 to buy that coffee pot.

I see heaven in our children and their innocent yet profound understanding of God’s Grace, when I bless a child during communion and a little hand reaches up and blesses me with the sign of the cross on my forehead.

Heaven shines in this place with every embrace during the sharing of the peace, with every tear shed during prayer.

Heaven shows up when our youth clean a park, when the choir sings at nursing homes, when we serve meals at the Mission of Grace.

Look around. Sprouts of heaven are growing in all kinds of unexpected crevices of life. Is that what Jesus is asking when he says, *“Have you understood all this?”* Maybe the question is more like how it reads in the Message Bible. *“Are you starting to get a handle on all this?”*

And if we look at the other parables, Jesus shows us more surprising aspects of heaven. In the one about the flour and yeast, is he saying that heaven is totally infiltrated into what feeds us? Are we feed by invisible growing particles of the kingdom of heaven in our daily bread?

And then what about the parables about the treasure and the pearl? These parables are saying that heaven is like something very small, yet very valuable hidden in a place that is very large?

What is Jesus saying about the searching, finding, celebrating, and selling all in order to possess this something of great value. *“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”*. And the merchant “sold all” to buy the pearl.

When we discover great treasures our normal daily life is interrupted and our priorities are changed; these changes in our lives require risk and sacrifice. It is the treasure and the pearl that have great power. This treasure literally possesses the ones who find it and takes over their lives. Is this what it is like to find and be possessed by the kingdom of heaven? It is worth everything. Pursuing heaven drives those who want it.

It controls us and leads us to take risks, which those who don't seek heaven think are foolish.

“Are you starting to get a handle on all this?”

Yes, maybe I am starting to understand. Why are there so many parables about the kingdom of heaven? Paul tells us in Romans 8: “ *It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*”

I am now beginning to understand. The reason Jesus spends so much time explaining the kingdom of heaven is because we need to be reminded that it's there even when it seems so excruciatingly absent. It's in those places where we see hardship and pain.

The promise of the parables about the kingdom of heaven is that even when the kingdom is not seen, it is near.

For our prayer this week I invite you to think about those weedy places that threaten to rob you of the joy of the kingdom of heaven, those places that Paul describes as hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or peril, or sword. It could be financial stress, addiction, marital problems, illness, fear... Write them down and bring them to the altar when you come to share the Lord's Supper. Let's ask God to help us see glimpses of the kingdom of heaven in our weedy scary places as we hold onto the promise that Paul gives us:

“... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor

height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Are [we] starting to get a handle on all this?” Maybe, but it's all right if we aren't. Just trust Jesus' promise. Heaven is real even when we don't see it and –then beware, heaven will show up in amazing, crazy ways. Amen.