



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

The Hidden and the Small

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen
on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 (Romans 8:26-39)
on Sunday, July 26, 2020 (7th Sunday of Pentecost)

So, how do you like today's rapid-fire images of the *what the kingdom of heaven is like*? This is a great topic, because people of faith are often mystified by what the kingdom of heaven – or God's kingdom - is supposed to mean.

Now, one could think, "well, the kingdom of heaven is about heaven, and this isn't heaven, so it's a moot point in this life." But today's parables are not about the next life, but *this one*. The kingdom of heaven shows up and reveals itself in this world.

So, in Matthew, Jesus tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like:

- a mustard seed that becomes a tree
- yeast that makes bread rise
- a priceless treasure you stumble upon in a field
- a priceless pearl you seek
- a net that catches good fish and bad fish.

Everyone clear now on this whole "kingdom of heaven" thing? Of course not. Parables, by design, are intended to stir up our imaginations, not settle everything once and for all.

Two things jump out at me when I look at these five images: one way or another, they're about hiddenness. The kingdom is often hidden, but revealed to the eyes of faith.

Also, the kingdom is about something that is small, but can grow in significance and consequence over time. And again, we can observe this, if our eyes are open.

We don't have to look hard in our world to see something or someone with humble beginnings making a huge impact. **(Pic 1)** The life of George Floyd was hidden to all but those who knew him...until he died. Now he's a global icon.

(Pic 2) The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how something so-small-it's-invisible-to-the-eye can grow rapidly and exponentially into a destructive force that consumes all our attention and resources.

The images in our passage today offer counter-images to something like Covid-19. Jesus' parables describe how the kingdom of heaven emerges from something almost invisible to the eye – a mustard seed - that also grows exponentially, but instead of taking life, it nurtures life.

It's no accident these parables are all rooted in imagery out of everyday life. A sower of seed, a woman baking bread, a fortune seeker, a merchant, and a commercial fisherman. This is where the kingdom shows up – in our everyday world and lives. Are we watching for it? With the eyes of faith, we can see it.

Or the kingdom is like a man who went on a hike. Actually, a man and his wife. Earlier this week, Heidi and I were in Bayfield, WI, for a brief getaway. The day we reserved for hiking turned out to be a search for a pearl of some kind: for beauty, joy, solitude. In the process, we found two trails we planned to hike were closed due to damage from a recent storm. And we found one trail that became increasingly muddy as the rain fell on us, and with the rain, so too, the mosquitoes. As the rain gradually picked up, we took an alternate route home and got lost, ending up – inexplicably - in a cemetery. **(Pic 3)** We tried to look happy for the picture. We just hoped we hadn't stumbled into a Stephen King story.

But eventually, in my craven need to get in more steps, I walked around some more in town while Heidi went back to our rental unit to dry out. I wandered into an abandoned section of town down by the waterfront, with old fishing warehouses and empty lots. Suddenly, like a portal that just opened up, I found an entryway into a garden, Dobson Garden - a little slice of heaven. **(Pic 4)** As I walked in, the rain held off, and it was like finding a treasure in a large field, or a pearl hidden in an oyster on a rainy beach. **(pics 5,6,7)** Here are some pictures of the garden that are not my pictures. Lovely shrubs, flowers, a red brick path, old fishing boats on display, statues of children at play, a lily pond. **(Pics 8,9)** And on those lily pads were lotus flowers. From the arched bridge, I looked down and lost myself in this little garden of Eden hiding in the forgotten part of town.

I found beauty here and an unexpected sense of joy and wonder. Can the kingdom be a delightful gift that shows up in your life? Absolutely! The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of life and of beauty that reminds us of the heart and imagination of God.

Imagine the everyday settings where you live your lives. How does the kingdom reveal itself to you? Are there overlooked corners of your life where lovely gardens are waiting to be explored?

Maxie Dunham tells a story about William Randolph Hearst, the famous newspaper owner, viewing a painting. He wanted that painting and engaged a detective to look for the original. I realize most people don't have this option, but just wait for it. When the detective returned, he had most interesting news. He had found the painting alright - in one of Hearst's own warehouses! Hearst had no idea that he already owned that which he desired.

So often we look desperately for God, only to discover that God has always been present in the warehouses of our own experience. In the fields of our daily living.

Are there little things you overlook that can give you joy and hope and perhaps grow into something bigger in your life? Might that be the kingdom of heaven?

This doesn't necessarily come easy. Our mind has to be retrained to conceive of the kingdom as something other than what we're used to. The kingdom as small or hidden – even hidden in the most unlikely places.

For instance, in our first lesson, Romans reminds us that all things work for the good for those who God has called according to his purpose. This means that when life is painful, or sin has run amuck, and God seems a million miles away, these are the very things referenced in “all things” from verse 28. In suffering, the kingdom of heaven is hidden and at work, just as the life of God was hidden in the pain and bloodshed of the cross, only to give way to life triumphant. I'll tell you one thing, no one thought the kingdom of heaven was parked next to Jesus as he died. Everyone assumed at that point that Jesus had nothing to do with the power of God, the kingdom of heaven.

So, too, with our lives.

Romans 8 reminds us *not* that all things *are good*, but that in the hands of the living God, all things – even bad things – can work for the good, can produce good results, Life out of death.

(pic 10) Here is a picture of where George Floyd lay in his final moments. Again, someone whose life was off the radar to most, and in a very telling 9 minutes, a life that was revealed to be of very little value to some. This man, in death, has become an iconic figure – a symbol who has dramatically catalyzed a global movement of heightened consciousness about racial oppression. I believe what happened there is like a mustard seed growing out of the ashes of tragedy into a tree of life, where people will learn to value everyone's life more than we do now. Where we examine the demands of justice more diligently. This is a Romans 8:28 promise. This is finding the kingdom of heaven in hidden places.

What about the ashes of your own life? Could the kingdom of heaven be at work there, raising up new life from brokenness? Sometimes in weakness and in hardship, we are more open to God's sustaining power, and something powerful grows within a person through that dependence.

I close with a memory from my childhood – a memory about the kingdom of heaven revealing itself in a simple act of servanthood. Some kingdoms are based on power and might. God's kingdom is always about servanthood, acts of love, large and small.

My family was at a Lutheran camp and had been on a long, overnight hike. We were returning to the camp and we were tired and dusty from the trail. Then the kingdom of heaven enveloped us. A group of people from camp – we didn't even know them that well – had been studying how Jesus washed his disciples' feet. So, as we approached camp, our friends were ready with pans of warm, soapy water and washcloths. They asked each of us to sit down, and then they took our boots and socks off. "Brave of them," we all thought! "This will be pretty gross." And then they bathed our feet in a heavenly bath! That is witnessing to the kingdom of heaven.

How can you see and participate in the kingdom of heaven in your life? Be open to wonder, to little things, to redemption at the hands of the God of life. Amen.