

Heaven is like. . .
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52
July 30, 2017 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The parables of the kingdom. . . In today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus presents the disciples with six different metaphors describing the kingdom of heaven. After the fifth, he asked the disciples, “Have you understood all these things?”; and they replied, “Yes.” Really? Did they really understand? Do you understand all this? I don’t understand *all* of what Jesus is saying. I’ve spent the last thirty years in serious study of the Bible; and some of the joy of that study is that the Bible continues to reveal new things to me every time I open the book.

Part of the formal definition of a parable is that it is a simile or metaphor, taken from everyday life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. (*C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, 16.*) I like that – “leaving the mind in sufficient doubt so as to tease it into active thought.” And the disciples say they understand everything? Commentator Maryetta Anschutz suggest that, while the disciples are always bold, they are not always wise. She notes that by responding with this bold “yes” they were “limiting in their own minds what God could do and what might be possible in the kingdom of God,” and the same is true for us. “When we say yes, we understand the mysterious, we comprehend the obscure, we do not leave room to constantly grow, to be open to mystery, to be surprised by revelation.”¹

Friends, obviously none of us knows what heaven is really like. The engineer and scientist in me likes empirical evidence; and so I listen with great interest to those who have had what medicine calls NDE’s or Near Death Experiences. These are people whose hearts have stopped beating and who have, for brief moments been “clinically dead.” They report of amazing experiences of love and light and warmth. They report of a true experience in the presence of grace; and, to a person, those with whom I have spoken tell me they no longer fear death; and in some cases actually look forward to the time of their transition from this world to the next.

But, of course, while the scientist in me loves evidence, the pastor and theologian in me recognizes that we proceed through life’s journey in faith. And the classic definition of faith comes from the book of Hebrews: “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.” (Hebrews 11:1)

¹ Maryetta M. Anschutz, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 1, Chapters 1-13*, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, ed. (Louisville, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2013) 15.

One of my favorite scripture passages comes from the second chapter of First Corinthians. It's a verse I often read to those who are struggling with end of life issues or those who have begun to move from this life to the next; but it ought not be relegated only to ministry with the dying, for all of us question what heaven will really be like. That's why Jesus gives us these six parables, as confusing as they may be. But in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul quotes the Prophet Isaiah, "God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being." What's this passage saying? Heaven is so amazing that we can't even imagine it.

So let's get back to our parables. We might not be able to imagine the blessing of heaven. The disciples may have been niese when claiming to understand the parables; but, Jesus does tell them with a purpose. Jesus does indeed invite us to consider this kingdom of heaven. So, while we might not be able to fully imaging the afterlife, Jesus does give various metaphors to describe it.

We read that heaven is like a tiny seed that grows into an amazingly large plant. Heaven is like a small amount of yeast that can grow to fill an entire bushel of flour. The joys of heaven are so great that one would invest all they own in it. The net of heaven is so wide that it is cast over all people. Then comes the last parable, "the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest."(Matt 13:52) What do we do with that?

Commentator Eugene Boring suggest that this is an affirmation of the old and the new. Here Jesus affirms his Jewish past (scripture, traditional imagery, perspectives and concerns) and, at the same time claims new light in the kingdom in consideration of the Christ-event, the impending death and resurrection. Indeed the new provides a new lens with which to interpret and understand the old.²

So what? So what does this all mean for us today. Personally, I cannot think about the kingdom of heaven without hearing the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us: "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." As I have preached so many time before, there's a call in that. No, I don't think God wants us to pray that the kingdom of God would reign on earth, and then simply sit back on our hands and wait for God to make it happen. God is calling us to make it happen. As Saint Teresa said so long ago, "Christ has no hands but your hands; Christ has no feet but your feet." Yes, I believe each of us has a call. In my personal prayers, I sometimes pray that God will bless all that I do, such that all that I do will be for the furtherance of God's kingdom on earth. Now, every time I pray that God will bless all that I do, I hear of words of a friend of mine who suggested that we should not pray that God will bless what we do. Rather, we

² M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible. Vol. VIII* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995) 314.

should do what God blesses. And so, I pray for God's guidance along with God's blessing, that God's kingdom on earth might come a little closer to reality.

A few weeks back, I was on my way to a Saturday Morning UMM breakfast, and listening to NPR Weekend Edition on my car radio. I like host Scott Simon; I like his perspective on life. On this particular Saturday, Simon told a personal story that particularly caught my attention. He stated:

I read my first *New York Times* when I was 12 and my summer camp counselor woke me up to put the paper in my hands. "The competition," he said with a smile. I was editor of the *Camp Indianola Totem Pole*, a small sheet on which we printed the scores of camp games, silly jokes and gripes about bugs in the bathrooms."

Simon went on to say how he was dazzled to learn that reporters actually got to travel to world to report on stories. He also told how that camp counselor told him, "If you want to be a writer, you need to read," and so he started funneling books Scott's way. He was the baseball counselor at the camp, and he frequently told his team, "Pay attention to the small things, and you'll make big plays." It's true in baseball, and it's true in life. That camp counselor went on to attend Yale, then Harvard Law School and Cambridge; but he continued to send Scott Simon occasional notes of encouragement. Scott Simon told this story because his friend and mentor, Neil Cohen had recently died. Simon concluded: "I am glad that I was able to tell Neil a few years ago how much I owed him. May his life remind this summer's camp counselors, lifeguards, and tutors that something you say – something you are – will stay with young people all of their lives.

That's furthering the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. That's sharing the love of Christ. No, I'm not sure what the kingdom of heaven is like. I have every faith that it is the ultimate experience of the amazing love of God; but I know my call on earth is to share the Good News of that amazing love in every way I can.

We pray, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. May those be more than just words. May they be a call to action to share the love of Christ, to further the kingdom, to do what God blesses, that God will truly bless all we do, in Christ's holy name. And all God's people said, "AMEN."

Let us pray. . .

Lord,

Lead us and guide us. . .

that we may truly do what you bless,

that we may further your kingdom on earth,

that others may know your amazing love,

in this world and in the world to come.

Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church