

8th Sunday after Pentecost – July 26, 2009

Matthew 13: 44-53 and 20: 20-28; Luke 17: 20-21

***YOUR KINGDOM COME,
YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.***

Every hour in the 24 hours that make up any Sunday on planet earth, the words are heard countless times. Millions pray these words each week in worship and many pray these words every day:

*Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Of course we know them – but what do we mean when we pray them? What exactly is this “kingdom” of which we speak? What are we hoping will come?

Perhaps the answer is a straightforward one – we are in conversation with God so obviously it is God’s kingdom we want to come – God’s will that is desired. This is an uncomplicated answer but possibly not the most helpful or edifying one. (It would make for a very short sermon though!)

First let’s look at Hebrew literary style to help explain why we might decide to discuss these two petitions as one...

Hebrew poetry is marked by the continuous use of parallelism. It is common practice in Biblical Hebrew for things to be said twice – the second phrase restating, or amplifying, or explaining the first. This is easiest to see and most familiar to us in the Psalms. Look at these examples:

Psalm 46: 7 *The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge*

Psalm 121: 5 *The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

In the Lord’s Prayer we say: *Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

If we understand this as an instance of Hebrew parallelism – one in which the second phrase helps to explain and define the first – it makes perfect sense to talk about them as one unit which is my plan today. In fact, you can see how the second part confirms that the *kingdom of God* is a culture on earth in which God’s will is perfectly done – to do the will of God and to be in the *kingdom of God* are the same thing.

That may or may not help you if you were asked to explain *the kingdom of heaven* to someone though. How would you begin? *The kingdom of heaven* is... Well, it's sort of like...

To what would you compare *the kingdom of heaven*? It's like finding the technology stock you bought in the 1980s for \$50 and suddenly realizing you are a millionaire. Like the owner of DeBeers finally finding the perfect diamond and selling a billion dollar empire to have it. Or, like a crack addict waking up with a clear head – free to choose a new life.

What can we say about *the kingdom of heaven*? What makes this *kingdom* any better than what can be obtained at the mall? Is it bigger than the consumer paradise promised every 7 minutes while we watch TV? Is it something that can only be found in the next life, so we must patiently suffer in this life to earn it? Will we be any closer to *the kingdom of heaven* if the right politician is in office, if our kids pray in school and Bibles are carefully placed in every motel room? If we double the number of participants in church membership classes and exceed the demands of the annual budget will we be any closer to *the kingdom of heaven*?

Maybe these sound like silly rhetorical questions. But I must confess that I regularly let things much less valuable than *the kingdom of heaven* take on vital importance in my life. As much as we wish to deny, repress and shove this thought into our unconscious, worldly success is too often our measure of *the kingdom of heaven*. We can easily settle for much less than the life Jesus has to offer. Our churches and our spiritual lives suffer more from an anemic view of what being a Christian can be like and a paltry view of *the kingdom of heaven* in our midst than from doctrinal error. When we start to complain about the hymn selections or meet far into the night about paint colors it is time to rise up and say, "What is *the kingdom of heaven* like?"

Jesus did not go to Webster's Dictionary or *Wikipedia* for a definition of *the kingdom of heaven*. He sought to stimulate the imagination.

Today's reading from Matthew 13 tells us much about *the kingdom of heaven* but to get a full sense for what Jesus taught on the subject we need to understand the context of the entire chapter – the "Parables of the Kingdom" chapter which goes something like this:

At the beginning of the teaching session, Jesus sits in a boat and teaches a large crowd that had gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus begins with the well known parable of the sower. God's word goes out into the world and there are varying responses. Jesus explains to his disciples that some will hear and become a part of God's kingdom while others will not hear and the word will have no effect on them.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and tares, or weeds, which he later explains to his close followers.

The remainder of the chapter is a series of parables which point to the meaning of the kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure...

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant...

The kingdom of heaven is like a net...

Our life with God is better than the most breath-taking thing we can imagine. We plant tiny seeds, we search the fields for it, we scour the marketplace and when we find the divine presence, nothing else can compare. It seems that the searchers in these brief parables are not quite expecting what they find. They didn't know their seeds would grow so well, they stumbled across the treasure while working the field, while looking for fine pearls they find one so incomparable. They were searching and working, but found more than their imagination could conceive.

This short series of parables challenges us into an awareness of *the kingdom of heaven* breaking in all around. It is there if we can lift our attention from lesser things – from competing sovereignties. *The kingdom of God* comes in the everyday and we must learn to see and celebrate every small glimpse we can. Can we see *the kingdom of heaven* in every unemployed person that finds a job, every addict who gets sober, every poor child who stays in school and receives an education. These are mustard seeds of hope that surround us. What small and insignificant seed of great importance are you called to attend to today?

The kingdom of heaven can not be concretely defined or contained in one simple analogy. It is difficult to get our minds around because it is all encompassing – changes everything about our world, our values and our priorities. And yet we pray for it all the time.

We pray, *your kingdom come*, knowing that *the kingdom of heaven* may begin small, but its eventual triumph is certain – it is like a mustard seed. No matter how difficult times may be or how distant the hope of God's reign may seem, the kingdom is sure and it has – it will – have a tremendous impact on all who encounter it – *the kingdom of heaven* is like yeast.

We pray, *your kingdom come*, knowing that *the kingdom of heaven* is of unimaginable value. This kingdom where God reigns is worth everything. It is something that is hidden beneath the surface of humanity's search for meaning

and significance. *The kingdom of heaven* is like a treasure that is hidden away beneath the surface of our living, but when we discover the love and care of God and the promise of God's reign in all things, life is forever changed. God's kingdom is worth everything – like a merchant who finds the one pearl worth everything. Giving ourselves fully to *the kingdom of heaven* – to the will of God – is priceless.

We pray, *your kingdom come*, knowing that *the kingdom of heaven* embraces a challenging mixture of humanity – it is like a net that catches fish of every kind. God will sort things out in God's time – God's kingdom will come – what God desires will be done. In fact, according to the passage that Flora read from Luke's gospel, God's kingdom is not intended to be definable or observable. It is among us.

We pray, *your kingdom come*, knowing that we are not to know the time and the place – human calculations or predictions about God's coming reign are not only futile but arrogant and irreverent. God's will is to be done – God's wisdom is sufficient. We are to live in confident, trusting hope because the reality of God's kingdom is the presence of Jesus here with us. *The kingdom of heaven* is in the midst of us as Christ's presence in our lives. The kingdom **has come** and **is coming**.

Jesus asked his disciples, "*Have you understood all this?*"

May God give us wisdom to understand *the kingdom of heaven*, courage to pray for it and grace to embrace it! **Amen.**