

Sermon, July 26, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends, Harriet Douglas and Larry Anderson who will provide special music.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are at an all-time high nationally, and many, if not most of our members are either in a high-risk group, or they spend time with friends and family members who are. We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we have reopened the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. At this point we are discussing Race and Racism in America. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office.

Now today's Stupid Joke: With my high school reunion canceled I am still calling old friends just to catch up with them. I called a guy I graduated with yesterday and asked, "So what's new?" And he said, "Not Much." I asked about his wife, and he said, "Frankly, we're not really getting along these days." I said, "Sorry to hear that. What's the problem?" And he said, "Well, she claims I never really listen to anything she says...or something like that."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Beloved and sovereign God, through the death and resurrection of your Son, you bring us into your kingdom of justice and mercy. By your spirit, give us your wisdom, that we may treasure the life that comes from Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

A Reading from First Kings, the third chapter.

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"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." Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

In our first reading, we are told King Solomon was blessed with great wisdom. But later we will learn he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, so I'm not so sure. Valentine's Day alone must have been a nightmare.

In our Gospel Reading, we have finally reached the end of Parable month. In case you forgot my sermon from a few weeks ago, today's parables all fit the category of "similitudes." That's where Jesus says something like, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." but then goes on to describe something you would otherwise think, "No it isn't."

In Matthew, Jesus mentions the, "The Kingdom of Heaven" thirty-two times. No other New Testament author ever uses that expression. "Kingdom of God" is the preferred idiom in the other gospels, the Book of Acts and the writings of Paul. But Kingdom of God is a phrase Matthew mostly shies away from.

Scholars aren't sure why, but many think it's a matter circumlocution. That's a fancy word from Latin that literally means, "Talking around," indicating a way of referencing a subject while intentionally avoiding saying its name. I have told you before that Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, and both the author and his immediate audience were likely Jewish Christians.

Observant Jews to this day do not speak or even spell the so-called Tetragrammaton, the biblical four-letter Hebrew proper name that we translate into English as, "G-O-D." Why? Because they consider themselves unworthy to do so. When speaking or reading scripture Jews are more inclined to substitute divine titles for the Holy Name, like "Adonai" meaning "Lord." Or "El Shaddai" meaning "almighty one."

In the Hebrew Bible God has other titles too--like Tzevaot/Sabaoth—meaning Lord of Hosts, or Armies. They often simply refer to God as “Ha Shem”--meaning “The Name.” That is, the name so holy that we lowly humans dare not speak it.

Such a notion was common in other ancient Near East Religions too, and probably grew out of a belief that given names have a certain power of their own. And that speaking the name of a deity invoked his or her immediate presence. You really don’t want that, especially since a face-to-face encounter with God would be so overwhelming it would mean certain death, at least according to the book of Exodus.

While the Hebrew Bible occasionally refers to the temple as God’s House, it is also often described as the House of The Divine Name. By tradition, the High Priest was allowed to enter the Temple’s most sacred space only once a year on Yom Kippur. And only he, while inside, was authorized to pronounce God’s otherwise unspeakable name.

I have mentioned before that pretty much every New Testament scholar on the planet thinks the explanations in these parables in Matthew’s Parables Discourse are the words of Matthew’s author rather than Jesus himself.

They point out those explanations reflect the worldview of Matthew’s first readers, but not necessarily the worldview of the first followers of Jesus, or for that matter us.

The Treasure in the Field and the Pearl of Great Value both appear to have a similar message. That whether we actively seek it out or just stumble upon it, once the Kingdom of Heaven is finally realized it’s going to be the best thing ever. The parable of the good and bad fish sounds much like last week’s parable of the Weeds in the Wheat. Both appear to warn against judging other people, pointing out that it is not only self-destructive, but also not our job.

I guess the only really NEW ideas in these five parables occur in the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast in the Flour. Most modern commentaries think they pretty much just mean, “The Kingdom starts small and ends big.”

But I think there’s a bit more to them than that. Especially after spending time this week learning about First Century Near Eastern mustards and yeasts.

Native Holy Land mustards are members of the plant family Brassicaceae. That’s the same family as cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower. By the way, Mark Twain once described a cauliflower as nothing more than a cabbage, with a college education. Cute.

But mustards are not the sort of relatives that family would be especially proud of. Because unlike their nutritious and delicious cousins, Near Eastern mustards are noxious and invasive weeds.

Their closest North American relative is garlic mustard, which despite its gourmet-sounding name is an absolutely horrible plant. First introduced into North America in the 1800s, garlic mustard not only chokes out beneficial native plants, but poisons the soil with cyanide compounds that kill the bacteria and funguses that are essential for the normal growth of beneficial plants.

Depending on which species and variety we’re talking about, Near Eastern mustards can INDEED grow to tree size, as the parable suggests. But despite what the parable says, ornithologists say nesting birds won’t go anywhere near mustards. They’re too toxic. They are also invasive, spreading seeds all over the place by the thousands.

According to the collection of ancient rabbinic writings known as the Talmud, it was illegal in first century Judea to plant mustard seeds in your garden. Not only would they take over and destroy it, but probably your neighbor’s too.

Turns out a little bit of ancient Near Eastern yeast could go a long way as well.

The *sa ta tri a*, or “three measures” of flour the woman in THAT parable had would have been enough to make more than a hundred loaves of bread. But yeast in first century Judea didn’t come neatly dried in jars or those tidy foil-wrapped shelf packs.

Bread in the Biblical era was leavened much like sourdough back in the days of the California Gold Rush, where a small amount of bacteria and fungus-laden “starter dough” was used essentially to “infect” new dough to make fresh bread.

Sources of yeast and bacteria for leavening in the ancient world included a slimy goo extracted from olive brine; and also the fungus that creates the white shiny film on the skins of grapes and plums that are going bad. Yum. So in other words, leavening one’s essential daily bread was initiated by some rather foul and disgusting substances.

I suspect that if Jesus addressed these parables to us today he might use different similitudes than mustard or yeast. Maybe he’d tell the parable of the kudzu or crabgrass. Or how about, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like the swine flu, shingles or even Covid 19.” Meaning the Kingdom may at times appear ugly, or messy. But keep the faith and don’t give up hope, because it will get better.

Most Matthew scholars agree that in the Parable Discourse Jesus was mostly warning about problems likely to arise in the Church, and the many difficulties it will face. That has proven to be true from its formative days to Matthew’s time, and even our own.

The earliest churches we know much about were the ones the Apostle Paul founded. From his letters, it is clear they had all sorts of trouble from without AND within.

There is certainly no shortage of times organized Christianity itself has gotten pretty ugly. The Crusades and Inquisition come to mind, and especially the Holocaust.

How about the Witch Trials of Early Modern Europe that resulted in the burning or hanging of up to sixty thousand innocents.

Our faith was used (or rather misused) to justify human slavery for centuries, as well as the sins of European Colonialism. And even today some Christians insist on judging other people who are not like us—something Matthew's Jesus specifically warned against. Today hundreds of victims of domestic violence will remain silent in deference to mistaken notions of biblical family values.

Ugly and messy indeed.

Which is why our founder and Reformer Martin Luther advised and encouraged us to keep on reforming the Church whenever necessary, which it will often be. By doing so, we can continue to trust in the Kingdom of Heaven. AKA The Kingdom of God.

Today our faith is facing new challenges, that threaten the future of worship and religious tradition as we know it. We stopped public worship in this building in mid-March, and by April ninety percent of American and European Churches and Synagogues had as well. In spite of that, hundreds if not thousands of people have been infected with corona virus in churches that stayed open or have re-opened since, including several in West Virginia that insist they strictly followed state and CDC guidelines.

We all miss the in-person community formation activities of this congregation, where it was easy and comfortable to thank and praise our God together, celebrate our victories together and support each other through difficult times. I miss the fellowship of the hands-on ministry in which I have been engaged here over the last fifteen-plus years. But I

am also encouraged by new doors that have opened in this community and new opportunities to rededicate myself to the cause of social justice.

Also on the bright side, these days some of our shut-ins and homebound folks are able to participate in on-line worship, helping them again feel like a part of our church. In fact there are more people worshipping with us this morning than could ever fit into this building.

But it is still quite messy out there. Four million Americans are now infected with a deadly disease for which there is no predictably effective treatment or cure. The economy is awful. Another million and a half people filed new unemployment claims last week. Twenty-eight million face eviction because they can't pay their rent or mortgage payments. Millions more have lost health insurance, at a time when so many are getting sick.

We've all been eagerly waiting to hear some good news. Thankfully today we have. Because there is a Kingdom coming. And once it is fully realized, it will indeed be the best thing ever. Thanks to a God who loves us so much he will get us through this. And probably won't even mind if we dare to call on him by name.

Amen.
