

Pentecost 10A (Proper 12)

July 30, 2023

Matthew 13:44-52

For the third consecutive week our gospel for the day comes from Matthew 13, and for the third consecutive week the Lord speaks to us in parables. Two weeks ago it was the parable of the sower and the seed. Last Sunday it was the parable of the weeds sown among the wheat.

This morning we will focus our attention on three more parables of Jesus. Each parable is unique, but they are all three alike. In fact, they have something in common with last Sunday's parable. Jesus introduces them all with the same six-word phrase: **"The kingdom of heaven is like..."**

"The kingdom of heaven" is not exactly easy to define. It means different things to different people. It can mean different things depending on the context. And perhaps that's why Jesus used it. That little phrase is broad enough to cover the many and varied aspects of God's saving activity, including two spiritual truths in our text for today, truths that we will discover as we consider these parables. The kingdom of heaven has infinite value. It anticipates a final verdict.

In the first parable Jesus introduces us to a man who found a treasure hidden in a field. What might sound strange and maybe foolish to our ears wasn't all that unusual back then. Before there were safes or safety deposit boxes men of means sometimes hid some of their wealth in an undisclosed location. That way if they were ever robbed or forced to flee they could come back for it later.

Eventually someone did come back to the treasure, but it wasn't the man who buried it. Someone else found it, and immediately his mind starting working: "It won't be easy to do," he thought to himself, "but if I want to keep this treasure I'll need to cover it up again. I have to bury it and buy the field, even if it means that I have to sell everything I own." And that is exactly what he did.

This parable leaves us with some unanswered questions: Should we praise the man because he didn't just steal the treasure? Or should we condemn him because he purchased the field without telling the owner why he wanted to buy it? And as far as the interpretation goes, who is the man? What is the field? What is the treasure?

When we study parables, there is always the temptation to get side-tracked. It's easy to get bogged down in all the little details of the story. What we need to remember, what Jesus wants us to remember, is that every parable has one main point of comparison. The point of this parable is that the kingdom of heaven is something of great value.

And just in case his disciples didn't get it the first time, Jesus told them a second parable to drive the point home: ***"Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it"***.

This parable gives us a little more information about its main character. He was a merchant, and he was looking for fine pearls. The rest of the story reads much the same as the parable that precedes it. Both men found something valuable. Both men recognized its value. And both men were willing to give up everything they had in order to get their hands on it.

When Jesus told these twin parables he could have been talking about only one thing. What is the treasure? What is the pearl? What is so valuable that is worth more than everything else in the world combined? Only Jesus himself.

Only Jesus could be true man and true God. Only Jesus could die and rise again. Only Jesus could tell a paralyzed man: ***“Get up and walk”*** AND ***“Your sins are forgiven”***. Only in Jesus can we find peace and hope and joy and purpose. He is the way to the kingdom of heaven.

How much is that worth to you? If we spent the rest of the service taking turns standing up and telling everyone how much Jesus means to us and it came to your turn, what would you say? I know what I would say. I would say that Jesus means everything to me, that he is worth more than anything to me, that I would gladly trade all my worldly possessions for my guaranteed place in heaven. That’s what I would say, and I am guessing that many of you would say the same.

It’s one thing to say all those things, but would we really mean it? Would we be able to produce ample evidence to prove it? What would your checkbook say? What would your daily schedule say? Would they declare, “Jesus is worth more to me than anything else in the world?” Or would the way we live our lives reveal that Jesus comes in second or third or some place farther down the list?

The kingdom of heaven has infinite value. It is a priceless treasure. But you don’t have to find it. You don’t have to buy it. God gives you the gift of eternal life in his Word. Through his Son. Everyone who believes in Jesus will live forever, but whoever fails to give him the honor he deserves is destined for destruction.

Those aren’t my words. That is the point of the next parable, where Jesus warns his disciples that there will be a day of reckoning, a day when every person will have to stand before the Judge, a day when he will look at the evidence and hand down a final verdict.

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on shore. They sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away”.

The large catch of fish represents people, all kinds of people. But Jesus’ interpretation of the parable reveals that not every fish caught in the net is a believer:

“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

Some of Jesus’ parables were addressed to large crowds of people, but not this one. The Lord was out of the public eye. He was in a house with his disciples. He wanted the Twelve to appreciate what they had. He also wanted them to understand that what they had could be lost.

It’s possible that Jesus used the parable of the net as a general warning. Some of the disciples were fishermen. They had seen and smelled piles of dead fish. It probably didn’t take much for them to make the connection between dead fish and the consequences of a dead faith.

This parable did make a lasting impression on a disciple in that house. Matthew remembered it. Matthew included it in his gospel for future generations of Jesus’ followers as a warning for us.

The parable of the net teaches us that there will be hypocrites in the church until the end of time. Hypocrisy will always be a problem, but it is not a problem God asks you to solve. You can’t look into other people’s hearts, but you can examine your own hearts. And you would do well to heed Jesus’ warning.

On Judgment Day ***“the angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”***. If that warning sounds familiar, it’s because it is almost identical to the conclusion of the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

Why did Jesus feel the need to repeat this warning? Why did Matthew record the same fire and brimstone warning twice in less than ten verses? Because we need to hear it again and again. We need to be reminded that hell is a real place, a terrible place, a place of never ending pain and punishment, especially in a culture where “judgment” has become a dirty word and the existence of hell is being challenged even by people who call themselves Christians.

Here are just a couple examples. Five years ago the presiding bishop of the ELCA said this in an interview with the Chicago Sun Times. The interviewer asked the question, “Is there a hell?” The bishop replied, “There may be, but I think it is empty. Pastors of popular megachurches have denied the existence of hell. More and more Christians deny that there is a hell.

I can understand why people might come to that conclusion. If you accept the reality of a real hell, then you have to entertain the possibility that you might end up there. And if you have an active conscience, it will tell you that you deserve to go there every time you do something wrong.

But if there is no hell, there is no reason to worry. If there is no hell, there is no personal accountability. You can do whatever you want whenever you want, and there will be no consequences.

But there will be consequences. There will be consequences because hell is real. Sin is real. Judgment is real. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. He will stand over each one of us and issue a final verdict: “Not guilty.” Not because we are guiltless. But because he is guiltless. Because he has removed our guilt. Not because we are sinless. But because he is sinless. Because he has paid for our sins. We are righteous because God has declared us righteous, because our Savior has made us righteous. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Not because you perfectly love Jesus and have flawlessly given up everything to follow him without erring. But because he has given up everything to purchase the kingdom for you.

Because of Jesus the kingdom of heaven is more than an ambiguous phrase the Lord used to introduce parables. The kingdom of heaven is a place, a real place, the place where you will spend eternity. Amen.