

When the Saints Go Marching In, or Not **By Reverend Litton Logan**

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Scriptures:

31He put before them another parable: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it 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."

33He told them another parable: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed (Gk. hide) in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." **Matthew 13:31-33 (NRSV)**

44"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.

45"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52And 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. **Matthew 13:44-52 (NRSV)**

Introduction and Comments:

A very prominent and wealthy politician died and arrived at the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter asked him, "What have you done to merit entrance into Heaven?"

The politician thought a moment and then said, "A week ago, I gave a quarter to a homeless person on the street."

Saint Peter asked Gabriel to check this out in the records, and after a moment, Gabriel affirmed that it was true. Saint Peter said, "Well, that's fine, but it's not really quite enough to get you into Heaven."

The politician said, "Wait, wait! There's more! Three years ago, I also gave a homeless person a quarter."

Saint Peter nodded to Gabriel, who, after a moment, nodded back to affirm that it was true.

Saint Peter then whispered to Gabriel, "Well, what do you suggest we do with this fellow?"

Gabriel gave the politician a sidelong glance, and then said to Saint Peter, "Let's give him back his 50 cents and tell him to go to . . ."

Things ain't always as we think they are, are they?

Sermon:

This morning, we have heard a series of short parables - two agricultural parables, one domestic parable, and three parables about commerce. The commercial parables are peculiar to

Matthew's Gospel. Best scholarship says that Matthew and his audience were an urban community of Jesus-believers and may not have understood these parables as Jesus' peasant audience would have some fifty-odd years earlier in the out-backs of Galilee.

Matthew uses the term Kingdom of Heaven as a euphemism for the Kingdom of God because as a pious Israelite, he did not want to speak the holy name. In addition, I want to point out that the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God was and is the heart of Jesus' teachings and ministry.

But, let's go back a bit in history. After Israel's leading citizens were taken into Babylonian captivity between 597 and 582-81 B.C.E., something phenomenal occurred. Some religious genius (*a genius far beyond Einstein*) had an unprecedented epiphany; that epiphany being, the god of the Israelites had not been defeated by the Babylonian gods, had not lost its people, or its holy land; because the god of Israel could not be contained in a temple, totally identified with just a specific people, or an earthly location. In an evolving understanding, Israel's god became the only real and true god and ruler of all heaven and earth and the ultimate power behind all of creation, kings, and kingdoms.

Within these expanded understandings, the prophets of Israel believed that there would come a day when their god would dramatically intervene in the human condition, judging all nations, including some in Israel, and usher in an age of universal peace, harmony, and prosperity for God's people and those nations that honor God's people. After this Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, God's sovereign will and ways would rule the world from Jerusalem with Judean Israelites as its exemplars and administrators.

Some of the exiles eventually did return to Judea or were sent back to create a friendly, buffer vassal state between the Babylonians and a very aggressive Egypt. Subsequently, in fits and starts, the returnees rebuilt the Temple and again worshipped their god on holy land. However, over time, the people fell back in to apostasy under the corrupting effects of Alexander the Great's Greek culture and later the Romans.

Amid the corruption and abuses of his day and at a time of heightened expectations of the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, John the Baptist came on the scene preaching a message of repentance to fellow Israelites, telling them to turn from their accommodations of heathen influences that had corrupted the ways and practices of God. John said the people needed to get right with God because judgment was coming again and soon. When Jesus started his ministry, he likewise told his fellow Israelites to repent, turn from their misplaced trust in the corrupted, institutional wisdom of the day, especially as it concerned the nature and ways of the Kingdom of Heaven and a person's place in that kingdom.

Jesus taught that the way to and the ways of the coming Kingdom of Heaven and person's participation in it would not come through militarism, lavish sacrifices, great cultic edifices, or rigorous law-keeping. Jesus implored the people - many of whom we would call highly devout, religious people - to turn from their corrupted traditions, beliefs, and practices that distorted God's will and victimized people and embrace the Good News of God. That Good News was: God's rule is already here, now, in the lives of all those Israelites, who honor God in compassionate caring for their neighbors as themselves. The fullness or completeness of the Kingdom, however, will only be realized at the appropriate time through the ways and means of God. John and Jesus both expected all this to happen soon.

It is at this point, that I want to take a different tack from most post-Reformation interpretations of Matthew's parables. I say this because many European and Western Christians tend to read the New Testament from a highly individualistic and guilt oriented perspective. Matthew's parables lend themselves as such if one does not take into consideration Matthew's or Jesus's culture. However, as I said, I am not sure Matthew's use of these parables for his urban

Jesus-believing community is what Jesus' peasant audiences would have heard - a hearing that could be useful for us today.

Jesus, in his attempts to jar people's thinking loose from un-reflected upon traditions and understandings, in hopes that they would rethink or revision the Kingdom of Heaven, tells them that the Kingdom is like the tiny seed of a ubiquitous weed, the mustard plant, that someone has purposely sown in a field. This weed could take over a field in no time and was substantial enough to support small birds' nests and their hatchlings, with the implication that it would be difficult to uproot and get rid of the plant.

The seeds of the black and white wild mustard, indigenous to Palestine, are edible in a variety of ways, but they are nonetheless weeds; no one planted mustard, it grew aplenty in the wild. Like poke salad where I grew up. No one I knew ever planted poke salad, it grew wild along the roadsides and edges of the fields, and besides, if a person wanted to plant edible greens, they didn't plant an inferior one, they planted turnip greens or collard greens.

I stress the point that for Jesus' Palestinian peasant audience, mustard seeds would not have been sown in a field that could have been used to grow wheat, barely, sorghum, or some other highly desired plant, like turnip greens, collards, okra, or black-eyed peas.

Talk about warping people's thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven. Not only that, but what was all the silliness about the Kingdom of Heaven somehow already being here like a seed awaiting its fullness in the future? Everyone knew that the Kingdom of Heaven would come in a mighty in-breaking of God's divine agent, the rompin', stompin' Son of Man and his angelic cohorts, who would sort, save, and punish. Jesus, however, seems to be saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is already here, growing like some weed. Dumb!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a woman, who took approximately ten gallons of flour, enough to make bread for 100-150 people, and hid yeast in it. The Greek word rendered in the NRSV as "mixed" is actually "hid", ἐγκρύπτω, egkryptō. (Hear the word "crypto") This is another case of a lack of western understandings of the culture of Jesus that distorts scripture. Mixing yeast in flour to make bread would have been a normal thing to do; one didn't need to hide it. Thus, this parable wouldn't work if Jesus wanted to upset conventional thinking. However, yeast in some religious contexts was sometimes used symbolically to talk about corruption, especially in relationship to unleavened bread and in matters of ritual purity. When making unleavened bread for the Passover celebration, women would take great care to cover flour and dough to keep out any spurious yeast spores that could contaminate the bread, causing it to rise. So, I think we need to hear this woman, especially given the volume of flour and the reference to hiding yeast as purposely corrupting the flour used for making the sacred, unleavened bread for the Passover meal, just as someone sowed weeds in a field. Now Jesus had his audience's attention.

The Kingdom of God is like an unethical plowman, who contracted to plow another person's field and while plowing uncovers a buried treasure in the field. In Jesus' world of limited good and goods, the plowman was in effect taking something allocated by chance or happenstance to another or had possibly been buried by a previous relative of the owner of the field and its location lost or forgotten. Since there were no banks per se or safety deposit boxes available to the common people in ancient Palestine, they often buried their valuables, especially during times of threat. If a person was killed or carried off, the treasure remained buried until either the person, as a survivor, or a family member, if they knew about it, recovered it; or it was accidentally found by someone like a plowman or dug up by a modern archeologist.

In his joy, the unscrupulous plowman rather than taking the treasurer to the owner of the field, recovers it and goes and sells everything of value he had to raise enough money to buy the field and have the treasure and field all too himself.

The Kingdom of God is like a jewel merchant who sought to buy fine pearls and discovered one of rare quality. If Jesus audience had heard this parable, they would have been shocked. The shocker would have been the wealthy merchant. All merchants, especially wealthy ones, were a bit crooked because in a world of limited goods, for one person to acquire more or to become wealthy was always at the expense of others. At the heart of acquisition, lay the cardinal Ancient Near Eastern sin of envy. However, this may not have been Matthew's sense of things since some of his urbanite church members may have been merchants or held a different view of merchants. Be that as it may, the rare pearl in the merchant's estimation was worth liquidating all his assets just to have it.

At the center of all these parables as I have interpreted them for Jesus' audiences would have been the idea of corruption, people and things not being right or belonging. Jesus's peasant and oppressed audience would have been shocked at the notion that the Kingdom of God is here, now, and coming in its fullness like a weed or yeast, corrupting their sacred worldviews and practices. In addition, how does one understand an unethical plowman and some acquisitive, wealthy merchant, the least likely to enter the kingdom, much less somehow bear witness to it?

In summary, as many of the rabbis understood, as did Jesus, the Kingdom of God is always here and now in the lives and communities of those who take upon themselves the responsibility of learning the ways of God and practicing them in truth, honor, compassion, and caring for others. However, as Jesus points out, the Kingdom yet to be will not conform to most peoples' conventional understandings. This is, I think, the heart of Jesus' parables - the Kingdom of God won't be what people think it will be. To this I add, that given the expectations of many Christians, Jews, and Muslims, all so-called people of the book, when the Kingdom arrives in its fullness, it definitely will have world-corrupting affects.

I think Jesus was asking his audience to envision a world ruled by God's will by giving up their culture's social-political power models, which syphoned off so much spiritual energy in people's relationships to one another. Sadly, many then and today, seem more committed to power-religion, legitimated by various religious doctrines than they are to what cost Jesus his life; which was, preaching, teaching, and witnessing to the Kingdom of Heaven by calling people to live out of the holy ideals of divine justice, compassion, and caring. We pray often for the Kingdom of Heaven to come on earth as it is in heaven, but the state of the world tells us something ain't right folks; something doesn't belong.

I think what ain't right, what doesn't belong, then and now, are all those long-held, parochial notions of religious power-politics, exclusivity and inclusivity projected onto a coming Kingdom of Heaven to justify various religious and political status quos. I think Jesus in effect told his audiences that the Kingdom of Heaven, who is in and who is out, will be nothing like what they think or expect.

Okay, if the Kingdom of Heaven is not going to be like the Jews thought or what we've been taught, what is it going to be like? Well, all I can say for sure is what Jesus said - it ain't going to be like anything we expect or know this side of its arrival. Therefore, let's stop building silly religious air castles, hurting and alienating one another, and speculating about some day and live by Kingdom values today by honoring and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The last parable, a parable about commercial fishing, is one that many modern Christians find uncomfortable and incongruent with their notions of a kindly-old-grandfather God. It is the parable that points to a judgment; wherein, God on the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord will separate the righteous from the unrighteous, throwing the unrighteous like trash fish into a furnace to burn. I want to point out that the fiery metaphors of eternal punishment common in the ANE all carry the idea of the excruciating pain of being cast out, cut off from all that defines a

person, including their families, their tribe, and their god; that is, people not being allowed to enter or participate in the Kingdom of God when it arrives in its fullness.

Regardless of modern sensitivities or how it is framed, Jesus and Matthew both understood that the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, however and whenever it comes, entailed a sorting out process, a judgment, and a sentencing per God's standards and knowledge.

In closing, let me remind us in the strongest of terms that Jesus was speaking to his people; Matthew was writing to his people and about his people, people who had over fifteen hundred years of religious traditions that told them that as Israelites they were not only in the divine know but were to be included in that number, when the Saints Go Marching In. Jesus, I think, called all that into question for them and possibly for us. However, its coming, the Kingdom is coming, the question is not what will it be like, but who will be in that number. The answer: those who live by kingdom values now. "Have you understood all this?" Something old and something new about the Kingdom of God.

Bibliography

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