

“NOW AND NOT YET”
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

One day, early in my ministry, I went to visit a parishioner in St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington. He was pretty sick, and when I asked him if there was anything I could do for him, he asked me to say the 23rd Psalm for him. Not with him, but for him – all by myself.

Well, of course, I had memorized the 23rd Psalm as a child, and I’d said it all my life. Said it so much it had become rote. But on that day, when I was saying it quietly to a man who desperately needed to hear its reassuring message, I blew it. I lost my way – started out fine, but then, because it wasn’t written in front of me, and because I wasn’t just going through the motions, but deliberately thinking about each word, I messed it up. It was bad, and as if I didn’t feel bad enough about it, the man looked at me and said, “You don’t know the 23rd Psalm?”

Well, of course, I did, but I’d motored through it so many times, that when I slowed down to say each line individually, I lost my way and messed up.

I don’t know if that ever happened to you, but I think it’s something we easily fall into. Like saying the Lord’s Prayer. I think we just motor through it a lot of times as well – but do we really think about it?

And I ask that today, particularly because of one phrase in it – which is “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Thy kingdom come. We say it all the time, but do we really think about it?

If we do, I think it’s mostly about the coming kingdom. The day when Christ comes again in all his glory and sets things right. When truth and justice and righteousness prevail, when all is as God intends it to be. We hope for that day. We long for that day. We trust that that day will come, and trusting in that coming kingdom enables us to live in the present day.

But lest we forget, in today’s Gospel lesson Jesus reminds us over and over and over again – five times to be exact – that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven is already present. It’s not just something in the future, it’s now!

And he does that by way of a series of five parables – five little stories of what the kingdom of heaven is like. He says it’s like a tiny little mustard seed, out of

which something grows, something great, something which provides food for God's creatures. And it's like a bit of leaven, which makes passive ingredients work together to provide beautiful, bountiful bread. And it's like a treasure hidden in a field, and a pearl of great value, and a net filled with fish.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus doesn't provide a theological treatise on the reality of God's kingdom, instead he says, "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ."? Perhaps because it's hard to describe things like love and peace and justice apart from what they look like, or perhaps it's because Jesus wants us to be on the lookout for signs of the kingdom, and to realize that they're a part of our ordinary lives every day.

And when I say "be on the lookout" I mean "be on the lookout" because did you notice something about all those things Jesus mentioned – they were largely hidden. As one pastor put it, "The promise of the parables about the kingdom of heaven is that even when the kingdom is not seen, it is near." (On-line, "Inviting a Kingdom Imagination," Karoline Lewis, 7/20/14) You see, that's what I think Jesus is trying to remind us. Look around, because signs of the kingdom of heaven are all around you.

Oh my, do we need to remember that word from the Lord, because our world is trying to drown it out. If we're not careful, the voices of this world, the voices of chaos will have us believe that anything goes, that truth and justice and righteousness are impossible dreams, that it's every person for himself or herself and on and on and on.

Jesus calls us to something different. Jesus calls us to be people of hope and trust and faith. Jesus calls us to believe that life is more than what the world would tell us it is right now. And in these parables, I think he is calling us to pay attention to the gifts of God all around us, signs of the kingdom, signs of God's power and possibility.

You know, this concept is nothing new. Way back in the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo said this: "Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book, the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead God set before your eyes the things that God had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?" (On-line, Kathryn Matthews)

Indeed, we can't, but we have to choose to listen to that voice, instead of voices that shout gloom, doom and disorder. It's not easy, but I'll tell you one way to do it. Shut down your electronics for a while. Turn off the television and the radio. You'll be amazed at the change that will bring in you.

I experienced that just last week on vacation. One of the reasons I like to go on cruises is because, unless I want to spend a fortune to pay for the internet at sea, I am cut off from everything. I shut my phone down on Sunday the 16th and didn't turn it back on until the 23rd. And that means, not only no phone calls, but no texts, no news, no FB, no anything. You cannot believe how immediately your stress level goes down when you do that.

(I did make the mistake later in the cruise of watching news on the TV in our cabin, and I found myself shouting at the TV, until Mom told me to turn it off!)

But because I closed off all the other voices, all the world's voices that are so stressful, I saw things I might have missed otherwise. I daresay I saw signs of the kingdom.

I was walking down the hall from our cabin one day, and sat down in a chair for a few moments, when another woman came along and sat down across from me. We began to chat, and suddenly discovered we had read the same book and both loved it, which led us to talk about other books, which somehow led us to talk about what we did for a living, which led her to share about a terribly sad event that had happened in her son's life, and in a matter of about fifteen minutes we were sharing our faith. Two complete strangers on a cruise ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, sharing our faith, sharing care and concern – a sign of the kingdom?

And I think of the many conversations the five of us had with members of the ship's crew – wonderful, long conversations where we learned about their lives, not just on the ship, but back at home. Over the course of the week, we became friends with them – people from all over the world, the world that too often we erect barriers to keep out. Might those conversations, those relationships be signs of God's kingdom, a kingdom where all of God's people dwell in peace and harmony?

And because I was disconnected to the world, I found myself spending more time just being, and watching, and seeing things. And seeing things in things. Like the night I sat on the deck of our cabin all by myself and watched the sun set. And saw the most amazing thing. Take a look at it.

I don't know what you see, but I saw in those clouds Jesus washing the feet of a disciple. When I showed it to others, they saw Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. No matter – it was a sign to me, a sign of the kingdom of heaven, right before my eyes. What if I hadn't been paying attention?

Friends, there are signs of God's kingdom all around us, but Jesus says, some of them are hidden, so you have to look for them. But please, look for them, because they hold the promise that there is more to life than what the world tells us there is.

There is more to life, than just getting more and more things, and getting more and more power, and being better than everyone else.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a wonderful book called *An Altar in the World* and in it she talks about the practice of paying attention. She writes: “The practice of paying attention is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. To see takes time, like having a friend takes time. It is as simple as turning off the television to learn the song of a single bird. Why should anyone do such things? I cannot imagine – unless one is weary of crossing days off the calendar with no sense of what makes that last day different from the next. Unless one is weary of acting in what feels more like a television commercial than a life. The practice of paying attention offers no quick fix for such weariness, with guaranteed results printed on the side. Instead, it is one way into a different way of life, full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 33)

A life full of treasure – perhaps like the hidden treasures of which Jesus spoke? Friends, the kingdom of heaven is here now, and is yet to come in all its fullness. But we can so easily miss it if we’re not looking.

Oh, but if we do, we will see signs of God all around us, and when we do, we will know that the powers and principalities of the world are fleeting, and the chaos and the clutter of this world will never have the final word. And that no matter what is going on in our lives, all will yet be well.

One December a woman by the name of Janet Hunt was facing her first Christmas without her father in her life. He had died earlier that year. She was frankly dreading the holiday, but since she was a pastor, she couldn’t avoid it. She knew it would be a very tough time, so she tried to plan things so that she wouldn’t be overwhelmed by her sadness.

On Christmas Eve morning, she decided to bake some bread. She had just starting working with the dough, when her doorbell rang, so scraping the dough from beneath her fingernails and brushing the flour from her hair, she went and answered it. It was someone in need of pastoral care, so she went back to the kitchen, plopped the half-kneaded dough into a bowl, covered it and put it in the refrigerator. And off she went to care for her parishioner.

Hours later she arrived home. With very little time before the first service that night, she, as she put it, “with no hope at all, I opened the refrigerator door, and do you know, to my utter surprise, the dough had risen! I was shocked! When everything was working against it, that dough still rose. And that Christmas, the bread was somehow all the more wonderful for it having come to me in this way!”

Then she said, “Now I don’t know if mine is a Christmas story or an Easter story or just an Ordinary Every Day Much Needed Story of the power of the Kingdom of Heaven. I do know that it is an image, a story which brings me hope in a world which needs it more than ever . . . I need this promise of ‘the yeast’ and the certainty that it can and does work even when I least expect it, even when everything is working against it. Without a doubt, the world needs it too. For if it could happen in my refrigerator, Jesus would say it can happen anywhere: that hope beats despair and life prevails over death. Even here. Even now. Even in this.” (On-line, “The Kingdom of Heaven is Like Yeast,” *Dancing with the Word*, 7/20/14)

Friends, who knows where you will see the kingdom of heaven, but you’re more likely to see it if you’re looking for it. So may Jesus’ parables stir up in you a desire to be still every once in a while, to look around, and see signs of the kingdom – and be reminded that God is love and life is good and all will yet be well. May it be so!

Amen.