

Sermon

July 30, 2017

Based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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What's it gonna' be like? My oldest son, Micah, is like a lot of other young people right about now, as they prepare to leave home and go to college. What will it be like? Several months earlier these college bound kids went to the campus for a tour. A student leads them around, showing off class rooms, the student union, the theater, the cafeteria, the administration building, the library, answering questions, talking about campus life, trying to give a sense of what it's like to be at this university. I have never heard of anyone who decided to go to some random college sight unseen. No, before someone makes a commitment to go to a particular university, they are going to take a campus tour. They want to have some idea of what it's going to be like.

But even when you choose your school, there's more exploration. There's an orientation for incoming freshmen. There's move in week when you get settled into your dorm room and start building up a rhythm for your time there. All of this is done in order to answer that burning question, "What's it gonna' be like?"

Of course, you don't really know what it will be like until you get there and actually live the college life. Up to then, you hear people talk about what it's like, describing to you what being a college student is like. You are left to your imagination and general impressions. Imagination meets up with reality as you venture onto the campus as an official student, when you spend your first night in the dorm room, eat the food at the cafeteria, sit at a desk in a lecture hall and crack open a book at the library. Then it gets real.

I'm sure that as Jesus gathered his followers, those who desired to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, they wanted to know, "What's it gonna' be like, this kingdom of heaven?" They wanted to know what they may be getting in to. So Jesus tried to describe to them what the kingdom was like, sparking their imaginations to get a sense of what citizenship in this kingdom would be like.

Now, there is something we need to keep in mind as we hear these descriptions of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was not talking about some otherworldly place we go to when we die. I know it's easy to make that mistake because Jesus calls it the kingdom of heaven and we understand heaven to be somewhere we go when we die. But no, Jesus is talking about a real, living community that is here and now. The kingdom of heaven has already formed around Jesus. So, how did Jesus describe "what it's going to be like?"

First, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is small but makes a massive and beneficial effect. Mustard seeds and yeast spores are very small. From a tiny

mustard seed comes a large bush, much bigger than one would think would come from such a tiny seed. But mustard bushes are not only large, they are of benefit. Mustard, of course, can spice up your food. But it also has medicinal properties. It's important that mustard is planted in the right place. It is not meant to be planted in a garden. It's an invasive plant. No, mustard is to be planted in a field so it can spread out. Mustard isn't something you can easily contain. So the kingdom of heaven is small, it is meant to spread out, and it produces something of great size that provides many benefits to folks.

Yeast is a tiny living organism that is mixed in with flour. Once it gets mixed in, there is no separating it out. And you can't see it. It's like the yeast is hidden in the dough. That's what we find in the scriptures. Jesus said the woman hides the yeast in the dough, three measures of flour. Three measures is equivalent to fifty pounds of flour! That's enough bread to feed perhaps 100 people. It takes just a little yeast to make that much bread to feed that many people. And you can't see it in the flour. But you do see its impact as the dough rises and expands, filling up the bowl. You beat the dough down but that yeast just keeps right on working.

And that's the other thing Jesus is saying about the kingdom of heaven. Not only is it small, not only does it provide something that helps people, but it is persistent. It can't be stopped from doing what it is designed to do. Mustard seeds grow into large bushes. Yeast leavens dough. The kingdom of heaven blesses the world. No matter what external forces are pressed against it, the kingdom of heaven can't be stopped. It's going to be a blessing one way or another.

I learned this week what NNEMAP stands for: Near North East Material Assistance Program. It's not really Near Northeast anymore because it's not where it started, which was in the basement of a church in the Short North. Just a few people started that food pantry many years ago, back in 1969. I wasn't yet one year old when it started. I'm sure over the years it has had its ups and downs. There have been many volunteers, but I suspect the core leadership through the years has been relatively small. Unless you knew who they were no one could pick them out in a crowd. But NNEMAP just kept on doing what they do: provide material assistance to people in need. Over the years they have helped perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. They have distributed a lot of mustard and a lot of bread. The kingdom of heaven is like NNEMAP. What else is the kingdom of heaven like?

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is precious and worth everything. He said it's like a treasure box or a single pearl. And once you stumble upon it, like the guy who found treasure buried in a field, or once you find it after searching, like the guy who found the pearl, and you realize just how precious it is, you are moved to give all you have to possess that treasure.

Finding it might be difficult. You may have walked past it all along and never knew it was right underneath you. Sometimes you have to dig deep, under

the surface, to get to it. Sometimes to find the kingdom of heaven it requires you to go pearl hunting, which means you have to get into the mud, pull up an oyster, and pry it open to find that pearl. But it's there if you look for it, this kingdom of heaven. And when you find it, joy fills your heart and you realize you have something without price.

Baseball cards are just small pieces of cardstock with a picture of a baseball player on one side and a bunch of stats on the other side. Serious card collectors will have thousands of cards stored somewhere in their house. Almost all of those cards aren't worth much at all. But, some of them are worth a lot, especially the rookie cards for iconic baseball players like Mickey Mantle or Lou Gehrig or Johnny Bench. One of those cards could be sold for thousands of dollars. It's not because the card is of a different quality than any of the others. They are made of the same cardstock. The ink is the same. They are worth more because of the player that the card represents. And if you are a serious collector, and you are rummaging through a massive collection of cards at a flea market and happen across one of those cards, after letting out a shout, you quickly grab that card before anyone else finds it and then start doing some calculating in your head to see how you might pay for that card so you can possess that card.

The kingdom of heaven is sort of like that. There are all kinds of communities in this world. Lots of different associations, clubs, networks of people. But some of those communities are more precious than others. It's not that the people in the networks are necessarily different. The Rotary Club, AARP, the Thursday night supper club, the church, they are all made up of people. But the church is different because of what, or better, *who* the church represents. The church is a living picture of Jesus. And it has lots of stats on the back of the card: baptisms, marriages, ordinations, and even martyrdoms. And when you find that community that represents Jesus, your heart is filled with joy and you are moved to give all you have to be a part of that community. That's what St. Luke's is. This is a community that represents Jesus, a community that is priceless, a community to which you are moved to give what you have to possess it or maybe be possessed by it. St. Luke's is the kingdom of heaven.

How else does Jesus describe the kingdom of heaven? He says it is like a drag-net that brings in all kinds of fish. The kingdom of heaven is not "me and Jesus." It is a community that includes everyone, those who follow Jesus and those who don't. In those days, those who worked the lakes and seas to catch fish would drop a big net down into the water and drag it along, gathering up whatever was there. Then they would haul it up and start separating out the fish from whatever else got pulled up. It wasn't exactly a targeted operation. They didn't just try to catch fish. They caught everything and sorted it all out later.

One of our core values is that every person is a beloved child of God. We are a community that is committed to including everyone. We don't target just one kind of person. We are like a drag-net. We drag ourselves through life! Well, it may seem like that sometimes, doesn't it? We live our lives day to day. And as we go through our days, we come into contact with a lot of people. People enter into our circle of care all the time. And every moment, when we make that contact, there's our opportunity to be a blessing.

So that's the challenge for us. We are invited to envision the kingdom of heaven to be much broader than our own little community of St. Luke's. The kingdom of heaven is much more inclusive. It's like a great, wide net that encompasses the whole world. After all, Jesus suffered and died for all people, not just for some, not just for you and me. Jesus's fishing net is big enough to include everyone. So you could say the kingdom of heaven is all around us wherever we happen to be. All of us are caught in that net. But it isn't a net that binds and traps. The cords of this net are the cords of love. It is the Holy Spirit that binds this net and all who are in it together. Can we see it? Can we live into this reality? How might our lives be different if we kept in mind that wherever we are, we are caught up in the kingdom of heaven? If we can catch this vision, and realize that vision in our daily living, it can make all the difference in the living of our days. May it be so.