

The Hidden Kingdom
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2011
Text – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Our gospel reading this morning is a rapid fire series of parables about the kingdom of heaven (the kingdom of God). At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near – and throughout his ministry this would be the basis of his call to belief – the closeness of God’s realm, helping people to see heaven close at hand. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed . . . the kingdom of heaven is like yeast . . . the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field . . . the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls . . . the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea . . . Like a power point projected on the wall of our imaginations, one image after another – the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God is like this, like this, like this. Get it? That’s what Jesus says to his disciples – do you get it? “Have you understood all this?”

“Yes,” they said.

The images are sharp and clear. We get it. We know how, like the mustard seed, small beginnings can have great results; how, like yeast that leavens a whole loaf, a simple idea or action can influence an entire group or movement; how, like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price, a joyful discovery of great value is worthy of great sacrifice. We understand. But, having understood, then what? This string of parables can be understood without the kingdom of heaven part – that is, as analogies taken from nature, or good fortune, or simple human actions – the stuff of human wisdom. As a teacher of wisdom, this was a primary tool that Jesus used. In fact, Matthew says, Jesus didn’t teach without using parables (Matthew 13:34).

But if we are to truly understand the parables of Jesus, we can't divorce them from the one who told them, nor can we divorce them from the reality to which they point. It isn't just human wisdom that they impart, but divine wisdom; and they intend to direct us not so much toward living wisely in this world as it is, as they intend to reveal what it means to live as people transformed and equipped to live in the realm of God – present in this world to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

It's tough to know what to do with this gaggle of parables. Each one of them in itself offers much for our reflection. But if you take them all together you notice that each of them refers to something that is hidden. The treasure is hidden in a field; the one fine pearl is hidden amid shovelfuls of ordinary pearls; the net full of fish in which the good fish are hidden amongst the rest of the catch. And the mustard seed is hidden, too. No one would have planted mustard seeds on purpose. The almost weightless seeds grew into weeds that sprouted up wild – scrub brush. The seeds would lay undetected in a sack of some other kind of seed, thrown onto the waiting soil with the other seeds. No one suspects that a mustard weed would spring up among the ones that were planned. But no one sees the seed. It's hard to keep an eye on it, as it mixes in with the other seeds. And as it germinates and sprouts and grows, its final result radically reorients what is expected.

We're so used to the image of the mustard seed growing into a large shrub that we can easily miss how the disciples may have been shocked to hear Jesus say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," because maybe they would assume that the planting and cultivation of the kingdom would be more orderly and predictable, along the lines of human wisdom – laid out in neat rows. Last weekend Karen and I were in Oregon for Paul Soper's wedding, which was at a vineyard, and we saw what seemed like miles of perfectly maintained rows of grapes. Wouldn't you think it would be more like that? – the kingdom of heaven is like beautiful, magnificent rows of grapes – or cotton, or lavender – that what

goes in is what is planned, and that's what grows up? But when the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, this suggests that nicely bounded rows of expected crops are always being invaded by something that is unexpected. Those mustard seeds just hide there in the sack of other seeds or in the hand of the unsuspecting sower.

This may well have been a shocking notion to the disciples because we see in the gospels other ways that Jesus would upend their expectations. Surely, for example, they thought that when Jesus came into his kingdom and defeated all earthly opposition to his rule he would need one of them at his right hand and another at his left – and they argued about who should get the place of greater honor. Not only did he disavow them of their sense of the nature of his kingdom, but said that the leadership model would be that the greatest among them would be the servant of all.

Just so in the church, we want to be able to define what fits within it and what doesn't. So, naturally enough, we have important things that we regularly say and confess. We have Scripture, we have the creeds, we have liturgy and tradition and mission statements. We have convictions about how things are to go. We have boundaries – nice neat rows of carefully tended doctrine and practice, developed over the centuries. We have our personal boundaries, too – maybe not in theory but in practice – there's the God part, the relationship and family part, the work part.

But then, just to keep us honest, and just when we are least expecting it, we also have the voice of God whispering in our ear – the word of God dropped in the path of our carefully cultivated life - pushing us beyond our boundaries, forcing us to discern whether they are in fact God's boundaries or our own. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed – a tiny little symbol of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things. It just hides there – in the sack, in the hand, in the church, in the mind of God – like a mustard seed, a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value hidden amid the rest, like the

tasty fish hidden amid the whole catch.

At the end of our passage this morning Jesus declares that what is old and what is new both have treasure to offer. The witness of tradition should always be taken seriously, but always in conversation with new realities. What is new does not, just because of its newness, trump the traditions of the faith. But without engagement with the new, tradition becomes traditionalism – basically death. Many of the struggles and arguments in the church-at-large today either claim that God has said all that needs to be said or ever will be said – or that our traditions serve only to stifle the hearing of God’s word for a new time. So clear and certain have many become of their positions, and of the obvious correctness of their views, that seeing with new eyes and hearing with new ears is considered something that those who disagree with me have to come to – not me.

Maybe the problem is that we have become lazy – not willing to dig for the treasure or sort through the junk to find the one pearl of great value. Or maybe it’s simply being content to cultivate the soil of our own certainties and boundaries. But the word of God, the kingdom of heaven, hidden amidst the realities of our lives and our world, will not be impeded in its advance to claim every soul or every human reality for the love of God that we know in Christ Jesus. The kingdom of heaven casts a wide net, and no nook or cranny of our lives, no event or occasion of this world’s maneuverings is safe from the invasion of the kingdom of heaven.

Ted Wardlaw tells of watching a wonderful interview with South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This was in the early 1980’s, when the reality of apartheid in South Africa was still very strong and there was no outward sign that it would end any time soon. Tutu said this curious thing, Wardlaw reports, “When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal.”

The kingdom of heaven is subversive, hidden in what we think we see so clearly. It grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God.

I am more and more convinced that among all the challenges that the church of Jesus Christ faces in these days – and we speak of them regularly, often in ways that reveal a kind of resignation to realities over which we have no control – the greatest challenge may be our own lack of expectation, that God holds no more delightful surprises for us, that we're as transformed as we're going to get – that if we just organize ourselves in the right way, get our theology straight, get the right programs in place, we can move forward in expected ways and manage our redemption within realistic boundaries. Then maybe we can hold our own until the kingdom comes in its fullness.

But the nearness of God's realm challenges us daily to choose that realm. It is our responsibility to choose God's way, and to expect that God has more to reveal to us, to expect our salvation to make a difference in this world, and not just assure a place in the next. There are no boundaries around the kingdom of heaven. It breaks out in the strangest places and in the most unexpected ways. Our faith needs to be on tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the new thing God is doing, even in us. It needs to be on the edge of its seat, to listen for the word of life, intended for us – so that we may have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.