

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Title: “Parables of Jesus: Observing the Hidden”

This Friday night Lynn and I are headed up to Burt Lake to spend some time with friends from the Owosso church I served. Kit and Paul have a place on the lake and they learned of my love of sailing, so we’re headed up north Friday night in order to sail with them on Saturday. I’m really looking forward to it, not only because I look forward to seeing Paul and Kit again but because I love sailing. Always have.

Sailing for me is a spiritual experience because of the wind. The wind is something that is real, the effect of which we can see and feel, but we can’t see it, can’t just reach out and touch it, but we know without a doubt—without a doubt!!—that the wind is real. And though we can’t see it or touch it, it has the power--if the sailor knows how it works—to drive great ships on the sea. It’s not like a motor driven vessel that just needs someone to push the throttle and go wherever the captain chooses. No, a sailor has to work with what is given in order to get where he or she wants to go. It’s a hidden reality that has the power to move a boat if the one operating it can work with what is given.

The Greek word for wind is “pneuma”. It’s the root word for “pneumonia” and “pneumatics”. The Hebrew word is “ruach”. IN the Bible, both words are used for the word “wind”. But they are also interpreted as “Spirit”, God’s Spirit. In John’s Gospel, when Jesus speaks with Nicodemus about being born from above, he tells him:

8 “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Wind and Spirit are derived from the same root, “pneuma”. So when I go sailing, I think of the experience of being driven by God’s Spirit, the breath of God, and so it becomes deeper for me than just spending a day on the water. There’s more to it than meets the eye.

This is true of much of Jesus’ teachings in the NT: there’s more to it than meets the eye. That is, there is hidden meaning in what Jesus teaches, particularly in his use of parables, which is one of the unique characteristics of Jesus’ teachings.

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told

them nothing.
(Matthew 13:34)

10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; (Mark 4:10-11)

he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (Mark 4:34)

Parables were used throughout Jesus’ ministry as a way to communicate the mystery of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, between now and September 10th we will be exploring some of the parables of Jesus as powerful expressions of his teaching and preaching.

Today, we begin with a series of parables found in the Gospel According to Matthew:

31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it 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.” 33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

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; 46 on 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; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and 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.” 52 And 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.”

I’m guessing that no one in this room knows who this guy is in the photo on the monitors. His name is Lincoln Gaskin and he bought The first ticket sold for *The Phantom Menace* at the Chinese theater in Hollywood. According to the AP article telling his story, he had been there for over a month waiting to buy this ticket.

I took Josh to see it but we didn’t wait in line for a month to get a ticket. In some parts of the country people began camping out on sidewalks days ahead of time in order to get those first

tickets. Not only did people wait in line for long periods of time but fans were buying tickets at highly inflated prices, upwards of \$100 for one ticket! I paid \$8.50 for two.

Prior to the film's release, Donald Morrison, editor of TIME magazine in Asia wrote about the first screening in New York City:

To get into the Star Wars screening you needed a ticket, more precious than a passport out of Kosovo. . . . Security guards, as imposing as anyone named Darth, eyed you at four separate checkpoints. Inside the theater, an official asked that audience members turn in anyone who might be camcording the movie. After the screening, journalists stood in the rain surrounding and taking notes from an 11-year-old boy who had seen the film. For one wet moment he was a celebrity. (Donald Morrison, editor of TIME, Asia, May 31, 1999)

The film cost \$115 million to produce and nearly five years of George Lucas' life. He drew "3,500 storyboards for the new film.", according to TIME magazine, "Battle scenes, racing scenes, parades--all with thousands of characters in each shot and all to be computer generated."

When he assembled the visual-effects experts who would make his vision into a film, they told him, 'It's too many shots. How are we going to do this?'...It was kind of scary."

But they pulled it off. The film grossed \$200 million in only 13 days, eight days sooner than the previous record holder, "Independence Day". A lot of people placed a high value on seeing this film for the first time, and they were willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to get there: camp out on a sidewalk, pay an exorbitant amount of money for a ticket. For some the price wasn't the point. Getting first shot at that film was worth it.

As we know, Jesus used parables when he talked about the kingdom of God or as the more Jewish Gospel According to Matthew has it, "the kingdom of heaven". According to my Greek-English lexicon, the Greek word, "parabola", from which parable is derived, means: "a short discourse that makes a comparison." (p.612, Brown, Driver, Briggs.) Jesus drew symbols, stories, illustrations from everyday life to explain the mystery of the kingdom of God which eludes explanation. As I read about the lengths to which some were going to get tickets for the Lucas film, I wondered if Jesus would have used it as a parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like the child who is willing to sell anything he has in order to get one of those tickets to the screening of The Phantom Menace.

What is it we value so highly, we'd gladly forfeit everything we have in order to get it? When disaster strikes – a devastating flood, a tornado, a hurricane, a home fire – and the reporters start the interviews, how many times have you heard: "Things can be replaced. People can't. Everyone in the family is safe, and that's what really matters. We're just thankful nobody was hurt." Of course, those are the lucky ones. Others may have other stories to tell.

When John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren died like many public figures' deaths, it revealed something of what is important to us. As in the death of Princess Diana, people grieved publicly as they brought acres of flowers to places in which the three were

remembered. People left notes and prayers. One woman brought some flowers to the Kennedy apartment building where a sea of flowers already lay and a reporter asked her why she was doing so. The woman choked with emotion and said: "I can't say. I don't know."

Republican Senator Orin Hatch stood on the Senate floor and said that, as a father, he could only imagine the pain of losing a child and then went on to address senator Ted Kennedy, John Jr.'s uncle: "The people of the United States mourn with you and the United States Senate mourns with you."

Perhaps a part of the kingdom of heaven is the joy of remembering that at the root of our existence, relationships matter more than things, more than 401K plans, more than inheritance disputes or political differences. When we find ourselves overcome with that reality, we're ready to give up anything we own in order to get it.

The Gospel According to Matthew says further that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast, hidden. Its presence is obvious, yet not visible. Rachel Naomi Remen is a Clinical Professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. As one who struggled with serious illness personally—she has had a long personal struggle with Crohn's disease, Dr. Remen became interested in "reintegrating the heart and soul into contemporary medicine and restoring medicine to its integrity as a calling and a work of healing." (<http://www.rachelremen.com/about/biography/>). She wrote a book she titled, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, that I commend to your reading. In it she tells a story out of her childhood. I'll let her tell it in her own words:

When I was small, God was still discussed in public schools. I remember one assembly in which our principal... delivered a fire-and-brimstone kind of sermon to the entire grammar school. She read a passage from the Bible to us and told us it was important that we kneel and pray three times a day because we needed to remind God that we were there. Thinking back, she may not have said this in so many words, but this is what I took away. You prayed because you had to make Him look at you. If God turned His face from you, she told the hushed assembly of children, you would wither up and die, like an autumn leaf. And this part I am sure of, she actually held up a large dried and withered leaf. Even as a five-year-old it seemed to me that God had a lot of other things on His mind besides me. And in between the times that I was praying, He might blink and then what would become of me? I remember the fear, the enormous terror. *What if God blinks?* I became so obsessed with this question, so fearful, I was unable to sleep.

Dr. Remen fortunately had a grandfather who was an orthodox Jewish rabbi with whom she had a special connection. A few days after the incident, he visited her. She told him what had happened and asked her fearful question:

"What if God blinks?" and at last[, she writes,] my terror overwhelmed me and I leaned against his shoulder and began to cry. My grandfather stroked my hair to comfort me. Despite his gentleness he seemed distressed

and even angry.

But in his calm way, he answered my question with some questions of his own. “Nashume-le, . . . if you woke up in the night in your room, would you know if your mother and father had gone out and left you alone in the house?” Still crying, I nodded yes. “How would you know that?” he asked. “Would you see them and look at them?” I shook my head no.

“Would you hear them?”

“No.”

“Could you touch them?”

By then I had stopped crying and I remember puzzling over his questions because it seemed obvious to me that I would simply *know* that I wasn't alone in the house. I told him this and he nodded, pleased. “Good! Good! That's how God knows you're there. He doesn't need to look at you to know that you are there. He just *knows*. In just the same way you know that God is there. You just *know* that He is there and you're not alone in the house.”

God's presence in the house is an inner experience that never changes. It's a relationship that's there all the time, even when we're not paying attention to it. Perhaps the Infinite holds us to Itself in the same way the earth does. Like gravity, if it ever stopped we would know it instantly. But it never does.

This inner knowing is a way in which I orient myself, an unfailing point of reference. Its effect on my life is as profound, as deep as gravity's influence on my body. More than anything else, my sense of not being alone in the house has been what has allowed me to accompany people as they meet with pain, illness, and sometimes death. (*Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, p. 263ff.)

The kingdom of heaven is like knowing you're not alone in the house. You can trust God's presence though hidden from sight. You just know. . . .

I love the parables and I love sailing because both remind me of the hiddenness and reality of God's Kingdom. What we think of as tiny and insignificant—like a mustard seed or yeast—when it's hidden in the ground or in dough it has the potential to multiply beyond what we can imagine. Maybe we catch a glimpse of the promise of the kingdom's presence in the person who overcomes addiction or prejudice in order to work for the healing of others, or in the kid who befriends someone others won't, or in the one who finds and exudes joy through willing sacrifice, or in those who are surprisingly generous, or in those who see and stand with those who are pushed aside by others. Maybe we get a glimpse of God's kingdom in the face of those who face illness or fear with the kind of confidence and trust in God that offers courage to others or in those who use their popularity to lift others up. Maybe, just maybe, if we all had more confidence in the hiddenness of God's kingdom presence we would all breathe a little easier and not worry so much, trusting in the One who told parables that we might know, understand and trust that the kingdom of God is near, always near.