

Heaven on Earth

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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First Presbyterian Church
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Coming into church this morning, you might have noticed some bird poop on the stoop outside the doors. We have a family of birds nesting in the light fixture up above. I think the Trustees have gently evicted them once, which is fine. And it seems they've come back, which is also fine, in the grand scheme of things.

As any homeowner knows, we only share our property with God's creatures – we can't keep them off no matter how much we try.

I wonder if Jesus and his contemporaries had such problems. Well in fact, I know they did. The first floor of a home back then was often used to house family pets and livestock as the people slept upstairs.

So, what I really wonder about is did Jesus think of this living arrangement when he compared the kingdom of heaven to a tiny, little mustard seed that grows to become a huge tree, large enough for the birds of the air to come and make nests in it.

I mean, look around you. Someone at some time sowed the seeds of faith that gave rise to this gathering of believers and the building that we call home – a building with an entryway that birds have made their home, nesting up there, leaving poop on our stoop, naturally, inevitably.

Today's New Testament lesson invites us to see the Kingdom of Heaven reflected in the world around us, naturally, inevitably. It gives several comparisons of what Heaven on earth might be like, about what it's like to catch a glimpse of the fullness of God's being, and come to appreciate its presence here among us, in our world.

When Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed that is planted and grows into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, I imagine he's talking about the church. The church, for its members and friends, is like a tree for birds. It provides a place for the faithful to gather together, where people come and go as the Spirit leads.

It's interesting that the seed Jesus is talking about is a black mustard seed, the only such seed that grows big enough to be called a tree. The thing about black mustard is it spreads very quickly and is difficult to root out. It's kind of like a dandelion seed.

So here we're invited to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven – and in that, the church – as something that will inevitably spread wherever it is sown. And not only that, but it's something that some people may not value much more than a bunch of wild flowers or weeds. But God sees it as beautiful and essential, as beautiful as a field of wild flowers.

Next, Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is “like yeast ... mixed in with three measures of flour” until it is leavened, until the bread dough rises and is ready for baking.

Like a mustard seed, yeast is also very small. It takes only a bit of yeast to cause a huge transformation in the flour and water used to make bread. The thing that causes the transformation is carbon dioxide, which yeast creates as it feeds on the sugar that’s in the flour mixture. That’s the science of it.

Biblically speaking, our faith can be thought of as yeast. If the church is like a mustard seed that grows and creates a beautiful place to live in the world, our faith is like yeast that enhances and transforms the world.

Just like yeast creates carbon dioxide giving rise to bread dough, the carbon dioxide we breathe out – when our breath and words are used to build up the kingdom – that’s what gives rise to the community of faith. Yeast gives off carbon dioxide; we breathe out carbon dioxide. God needs and uses our words and the very breath we breathe, just like yeast is needed and used to make warm, delicious, comforting bread.

The Kingdom of Heaven, says Jesus, is also “like a treasure hidden in a field.” When someone finds the treasure, “he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Here, just catching even a glimpse of heaven on earth causes us to be so overjoyed and surprised; nothing compares to it.

Or maybe that glimpse of heaven on earth is not something you come across by surprise. Some people actively search for signs of heaven on earth, like a merchant searching for fine pearls. That’s another comparison Jesus makes – a merchant searching for something highly desired and valuable beyond measure.

Whether you happen upon it by surprise or actively search for it, you have to keep your eyes and ears open for even a hint of heaven on earth. And then to really make it yours – to take that sense of heaven into your heart and into your life – you have to do all you can to grab hold of it and never let it go, just like a hidden treasure or sought-after pearl.

Of course, with hidden treasure or a fine pearl, there are those in this world who would snatch it away from you. Or some people just loose it along the way. Don’t let anyone or anything – any circumstance – take away your relationship with God and your sense of God’s presence here among us. It’s that valuable, that great of a treasure.

Finally, Jesus says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. When it was full,” says Jesus, “they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.”

If God's kingdom is like a net that catches fish of every kind, then we are like the fishermen and -women drawing it ashore, taking the good fish to market, with other fish going back to the sea.

Being a part of God's kingdom – a part of the community of faith – means bringing in those who are willing to come alongside us, and releasing those who are not, sadly. Over the years, we've had people come and go here. And it is always our hope and commitment that those who come alongside us become part of this community of faith. And those who choose to leave us – we pray they find a place of love and community that suits them better.

The sad part is that sometimes those who leave us flounder out there in the world, and that breaks our hearts – breaks my heart. So we're always keeping the door open for them here – and in our hearts. Everyone is always welcome back.

Next, Jesus expands on the role and responsibility of those in the community of faith. He says, "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."

When Matthew wrote down these words of Jesus, he may have seen himself as a scribe or keeper of the Law of Christ, someone bringing new knowledge and wisdom to the Law of Moses, based on his relationship with Jesus.

Our relationship with Jesus brings us new knowledge and wisdom that is applicable to whatever the world is facing at the time, and whatever we're facing in life. The Living Word of God is not static and constricting; it's active and freeing. God's Word frees us to do all we can to build up the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

And the place where that happens is within the church, within the community of faith – where we can grow from a tiny seed to a great tree of welcome and protection; where we can breathe in and breathe out the yeasty, transformative spirit of God; where we can glimpse heaven on earth like catching sight of a hidden treasure and then claim it as the most valuable thing we have; where we can gather together those who truly want to follow the Lord and live by his way, always seeking new wisdom and knowledge to ground us in the faith, and to help us share it with others.

Spiritual growth, transformation, joy and blessings beyond belief, bringing in others, and together seeking new wisdom and knowledge in Christ – that, my friends, is what the kingdom of heaven is right here on earth. Amen.

I'll leave you with one other comparison. The Kingdom of Heaven is like bumble bees. According to writer Bill Hinson in his book "The Power of Holy Habits," when it comes to honey bees, "you always keep bees; you never keep a single bee. If you isolate a bee, you can give it the most favorable temperature for a bee, you can give it plenty of water and plenty of food, an ideal habitat, but the bee will die within two to three days. There is

something about the community of bees that keeps it alive. You can keep bees, but you cannot keep a bee.”

The Kingdom of Heaven is like bumble bees. They only survive if they participate in and maintain their community. Don't go too long before returning to the honeycomb, the worship, work, and fellowship of this church.

And for those you've not seen for awhile, reach out and remind them how important they are to this community of faith, and to you, as a fellow participant in the life of the church. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

God of all wisdom, and of profound mystery: We are grateful for the signs and indications of your presence, which you scatter and sow throughout the world like so many seeds.

By your grace, may they take root in our hearts and grow, so that we and all people feel you are near and have confidence in your kingdom and power and glory.

In a world where many feel friendless, we thank you for your constant companionship. In situations of violence and hatred, we thank you for your commandment to love one another. In times where many know death and destruction, we thank you for your spirit of hope and renewal. As you love us, make us faithful friends who love one another as a reflection of your good news.

We pray your Spirit of peace upon those grieving a loss. We pray your spirit of health and wellbeing upon those dealing with illness and disease. We lift up prayers of thanksgiving for those celebrating life events such as new babies, new friends, and encouraging news.

We pray all this with thankful hearts that you are near, that you care, and that you are even now working out your will for our lives and for this world. We pray using the words that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.