

“Hidden Treasure: The Kingdom of God”
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

October 22, 2017
Isaiah 12:1-6; James 2:1-13;
Matthew 13:24-33, 44-53

Sometimes things are hidden in plain sight. Sometimes we see things one way and don't see something another way. Sometimes we can see something and not recognize it for what it is.

In the story that Edgar Allen Poe wrote about *The Purloined Letter*, this guy has stolen this letter and he's going to embarrass somebody very important. So the police go in to get this letter from him. They know he's got it, but they can't find it. They look everywhere that they think he would hide it. Of course, this is one of those stories where they go off to the smart guy who isn't part of the police force, and he can figure it out. What he tells them is, “You looked everywhere that you would have hidden the letter.” The idea is that on the mantel there's a place with all these folded cards. He simply folded the letter to look like another card. It was hidden in plain sight.

These first parables of Jesus seem like they are about the kingdom of God being hidden in plain sight. It makes me think how oftentimes when I think about the kingdom of heaven, particularly when I say the words “kingdom of heaven,” it makes me think about a future thing. It's about that time to come. What about my expectations? Where do I look? Do I expect the kingdom of heaven to be in just some spiritual realm that is so hard to see that I will never find it? Or is it just at the end of life?

Jesus is talking in these parables about something that sounds like it is present, in the moment. It's just a little hard to see. Take the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In the past I've looked at that, and I think the word for those weeds is “tare.” If you look that up, tare is a kind of weed that looks very much like wheat, so that when it first starts growing you can't really tell the difference. It's not until you have the seed heads that they really begin to differentiate. The kingdom of heaven is present and yet it can't be seen.

Or it's so small, like a mustard seed, and because it's so small it must not be anything. Yet if we throw it on the ground it might sprout and become something. It grows into something that then can be a home to birds. It makes me think about how sometimes people wonder what Christianity has really done. Well, one thing it's done is it has sown these seeds that have become churches, homes for families, places where people gather and fellowship—from a seed.

Then there's the leaven in the bread. Once you mix it in you can't tell it's even there. So how can something you can't even see affect anything? And yet we know what it does. It makes the bread rise and gives it texture.

So these three parables are all about a kingdom hidden in plain sight, and in spite of it being hard to see, it has real effect. It's all about growing. Each one has some sense of growing, of changing.

Where do we go from there? Let's look at the next three parables, because if the kingdom of heaven is hard to see, the next ones seem to be about finding it. Finding the treasure in a field and then going and selling everything and buying the field because what you found is so wonderful, so much more than you already have. Or being in search of a great pearl, and finding the perfect pearl. All of a sudden you have something greater than you ever expected to have. Then, bringing in the fish and realizing some are good and some you really don't want. There's a clue there because it goes on to talk about the righteous.

I think it's about finding that moment, that righteousness in our lives. Take the disciples as an example. The disciples found one thing, one teacher, that they found to be really important. They found a certain right relationship with Jesus. They found one to follow and they left everything else. It's kind of a reflection on faith. When we find it, how important it is, how it shapes our world, how it enables us to go in a particular direction, how it leads us. But it does mean letting go of other things.

In our world today it feels to me like there's a struggle because so often we are invited to live life on the edge, to always feel excited. If we're really going to be alive, it's about being excited, being on the edge, being up. We could check with some medical professionals, but I think if we always have the adrenalin going, it ends up not being very healthy for our bodies. Yet there's that feeling that we're always supposed to be excited. There's always supposed to be the next thing. We're always supposed to be just on the edge of something new and exciting.

It feels to me like these parables offer something different. Something that's hardly ever seen. Something that's hard to see. We don't even notice it most of the time, and yet it gives life, like giving a cup of cool water. There are those moments when a person does share their lives with another, gives somebody grace, enables goodness to become real. There are those moments in my life when I've seen somebody do something that I've just felt like was so self-giving and encouraging. I wonder if that's not a moment when we're touching the kingdom, we're seeing a little bit of that treasure, recognizing the leaven at work.

Jesus is inviting us to recognize we have choices to make. We can choose to try to be excited all the time. We can follow the guidance of our society. Or we can listen and recognize that he's calling us to something deeper and something more important.

As he continues to invite us to both receive God's grace—that thing that doesn't seem like anything in some ways yet can make all the difference in the world—and to give God's grace. We may not see a huge effect right at the moment, but think about the difference. If you have a group of people who are just excited, always looking for the next edge, the next thing, and a group of people who are really caring for one

another, looking out for one another, loving one another, what is the long-term trajectory of those groups? Where is life really found?

So as Jesus concludes, he says, “If you are a learned person (a scribe), you are going to bring out something old and something new.” I always struggled with what that meant. But what begins to make sense to me is that I’m going to learn what Jesus taught—it’s been around a while—and I’m going to use it today. I’m going to learn where it works in my life and why it’s important. Something old and something new.

At the end of each parable, there’s this idea that there is a choosing of the good or the bad. It feels to me like Jesus is modeling what we need to do. We have to make those choices. We have to choose to live in the grace of God and into the kingdom, though we only may see mustard seeds or leaven. We may see it here today and then it disappears into the dough. It’s learning to trust that the dough becomes bread and goodness is born—baked in this case. It’s an invitation to recognize that though we may feel like we live in the weeds, the kingdom is growing and we can choose the treasure it is to live into it, to be the righteous, to share the grace of God and to know it. Then we, too, can pray: God’s kingdom come; God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.