

The Kingdom/Realm/Reign/Rule/Household/Kindom of God/Heaven is Like...

The parables of a mustard seed; yeast; a hidden treasure, a pearl merchant; a net.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-48
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 30, 2017

On the scriptural menu for today: parables, parables, and more parables. But first a word about the unusual title of this sermon: The Kingdom / Realm / Reign / Rule / Household / Kindom of God / Heaven is Like...

Progressives have an issue with words, especially when it comes to metaphors and inclusive language. That, for instance, is why most of us use the term "God" instead of "Father" when talking about God the Creator. We also take issue with hierarchial language, especially when tied to governing practices. The word "kingdom," for instance, has fallen out of favor with progressives because we don't live in a monarchical world anymore. And **kingly male language, including the title "Lord," which is often used in reference to God and/or Jesus, is also offensive to many.**

Alternative language, therefore, is suggested and substituted. But this, too, has been problematic. So when the gospels talk about being part of the 'kingdom of God,' – and note that in Matthew he uses 'kingdom of heaven' to refer to the same concept – options include terms such as: the **realm** of God, the **reign** of God, the **rule** of God, the **household** of God, and more recently, the **kindom** of God, which puts a particular emphasis on the relationship between us and God and each other. Yet, as mentioned, each of these also have their own problematic issues. And if we switch from a monarchy to a democracy much of this concept could also be suggested in the term the '**administration**' of God. For obvious reasons I'm not thrilled with that one, either.

What I can assure you is that no matter which term is used, someone will be unhappy, if not offended. Such is the nature of living in the realm of progressive Christianity. So as I need to mention from time to time, please run whatever I say, or anyone else for that matter, through whatever filter speaks best to your own understanding, especially when no offense is intended.

I realized, after I wrote that sentence above, I used the term 'realm' without really thinking about it. So that's what I'll use this morning. While certainly similar to a kingdom, a realm can also refer to "the region, sphere, or domain within which anything occurs, prevails, or dominates" (Dictionary.com). In this case, then, when we say that Jesus inaugurated the realm of God in our midst, it refers to an understanding of what it would be like if God's will was fulfilled "on earth as it is in heaven," to quote from the Lord's Prayer. This is **the sphere in which we live life by the ways of God as revealed in the teachings of Jesus. This is the realm where we love God and our neighbor as ourselves.** Jesus gave illustrations of what this realm is like through the telling of parables.

This is the third Sunday in a row that we'll be taking a look at the collection of parables found in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. After looking at the parables of the Sower and the Weeds Among the Wheat the past two Sundays, today we add five more short parables to that list. Remember, **parables demand something of us. They ask us to**

respond to the opportunity to be enlightened and transformed in some way. The question is whether or not we will allow a transformation of our thoughts, attitudes and actions to take root in our lives.

Of the five parables that we heard this morning I'm going to start with the last one we heard and work backwards. So let's look first at the **Parable of the Net**. It simply states "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew the net ashore, sat down, and put the good fish into baskets but threw out the bad" (vv. 47-48). I like what this parable says about an approach to evangelism. Just as a wide net is cast, knowing that it will draw in both the good and the bad, so it is in the realm of God. The doors are opened wide and worship, fellowship and programs are available to all. The net is cast wide and deep. Any separation doesn't occur until "the end of the age," which is God's business, not ours.

Into the community of faith, therefore, comes a wide variety of people who show up for different reasons and motivations. Such is true for each one of us this morning. We learn **the realm of God is wonderfully nondiscriminatory.** This parable calls us to evaluate our commitment to offering welcome and hospitality to all.

The next two parables need to be looked at as a pair. In one, we are told the kingdom of heaven is like a **treasure hidden in a field**. In the other, like a **merchant in search of fine pearls**. Both the farmer and the merchant go and sell everything they have in order to obtain what they have found. But the two parables are also different. The person in the field is simply going about his or her regular daily work, not looking for or expecting anything special. This person is very surprised, then, when coming upon the treasure quite by accident. The merchant, on the other hand, is actively *seeking* something of great worth, and finally finds something beyond her or his wildest expectations.

What Jesus reveals to us in these two parables is that **the realm of God can become real in your and my life by either method - by stumbling upon it or by diligently searching for it.** And whether we recognize and perceive it or not, God's realm is present with us already and will not remain hidden or invisible forever. So, as part of your own personal spiritual growth, I'd like to ask each of you this morning to reflect upon: What treasures of God have you discovered in your life, either accidentally or by searching?

The primary emphasis of these two parables, however, isn't on the process of finding, but on the overwhelming **response** made to the discovery. Together, they inform us that when our eyes have been opened to recognize God's Sacred Presence, and discern what God is doing in and through our lives, this congregation, and in the world, we should **respond by committing ourselves wholeheartedly. Discipleship requires commitment. It means giving our all.**

We now come to the parables of the **Yeast** and the **Mustard Seed**. These two are also somewhat of a pair, because both address the issue of the **growth** of the realm of God. Yet, they also have important differences. **The Parable of the Yeast** (also known as the Parable of the Leaven) simply states that a woman took some yeast and mixed it in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. That's it. That doesn't sound particularly shocking does it? But there's a twist that would have been evident to Jesus' original audience.

Do you have any idea how much "three measures of flour" entails? Well, we're not talking about 3 cups, or even 3 pounds of flour. The woman in this parable is evidently baking for an entire community, because **"three measures" equaled about fifty pounds of flour – enough to make bread for more than a hundred people – an entire community!**

Also, those of you who are bakers know what yeast does in a mixture of flour and water. The yeast causes fermentation, thus transforming the entire mixture. No part of the dough can escape its permeation and its influence. And so it is, Jesus teaches us, with the realm of God.

This parable is not only about growth, then, it is also about **the realm of God radically transforming the world**. Reflect, then, upon how your life has been transformed by seeking to live your life according to the ways of Jesus. And we, like the yeast itself, can become **agents of transformation** within the lives of others, in the wider community, and in the world. That's part of our mission and ministry here at College Hill.

We come now to the first parable that we heard read this morning, the **Parable of the Mustard Seed**. Jesus reveals that from an incredibly tiny seed comes a great bush, one that is even able to support the birds of the air. We learn that from remarkably small beginnings, **the realm of God will experience tremendous growth**. It has indeed. But growth from small beginnings wasn't the particularly shocking element in this parable. Rather, it's the seemingly harmless statement that, "the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." This statement would have mortified the original Jewish audience. Why? **The phrase "birds of the air" was a common figure of speech that referred to ALL people**, including the despised Gentiles. Jesus was telling them that **the realm of God, in the here and now, is an inclusive enough place to where everyone can find a home!** Today we would call that having a "big tent" or "big umbrella" philosophy. For you see, this parable is also not only about growth, it's also about **inclusiveness**.

As you can imagine, that didn't sit well with a lot of folks 2000 years ago. It doesn't sit well with a lot of folks today, either. Throughout the history of religion, an enormous amount good spiritual folks have believed that the "kingdom of heaven" is reserved only for them. They misinterpret Matthew's use of the word 'heaven' to refer only to the hereafter. Won't they be surprised! So, reflect how we, as a community of faith, have become and can continue to grow into a nesting place for all "the birds of the air".

What have we learned today about what the realm of God is like from these five parables. In casting a wide net, God's realm **draws in** all kinds of people. It can be discovered by either **stumbling upon it or by active searching**; but once it is found, it requires total **commitment**. Also, even a small presence of the realm of God in our midst can lead to an extensive and widespread **transformation** of all it encounters, including you and me. This realm will continue to grow and it will be open and **inclusive** enough so that anyone can find a home.

God's realm / kingdom / reign / rule / household / kindom (or whatever other metaphor you choose) is filled with:

- **Diversity**
- **Commitment**
- **Transformation**
- **Growth**
- **Inclusiveness**

This, in part, is what it means to live and move and have our being within the realm of God – the sphere of influence guided by the ways and teaching of Jesus. And as Jesus was often accredited in closing his parables, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Amen.