

THE JOY OF THE KINGDOM

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts

November 15, 1964

Scripture: Matthew 13:44-45

Introduction:

In the Gospel of Matthew we find two parables that are arresting for their brevity and crystal clarity. They are both parables of the kingdom and belong together. They read as follows:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Again:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

I. These are parables and the aim of all parables is to make things clear and not to obscure the truth.

- A. The parables of Jesus are not meant to confuse the hearers but to tell us how things happen. They are not riddles but stories that make use of everyday occurrences to drive home a point. Their purpose is to awaken the imagination of the hearer – to challenge him to see the obviousness of God's claim upon him.

Take, for example, the parable of the sower: every spring and autumn the sower goes over the field and some of the seed which he sows falls by the wayside, some on rocky ground, some upon thorns and some upon good ground. The seed that falls upon good ground yields some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. This is an unexpected yield in a land that usually yields no more than 10%. This is the point that Jesus wants to drive home. The kingdom, when it is proclaimed and received, brings a miraculous result. The hearers are put on the spot – since the soil is the human heart. That is why Jesus ends the parable by saying: *"He who has ears, let him hear."*

This is the way things happen: the hearer is addressed right where he is. He is challenged to make a decision on the basis of what he knows is obvious.

- B. Many of the metaphors of Jesus begin with a question which grips one right away, without any preliminaries: Luke 14:28-30 – the parable of the tower builder.
"Which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid down a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him saying: 'The man began to build and was not able to finish.'"

The answer to the question is obvious: Nobody in his right mind would undertake to

build a tower that he cannot finish. He would be a fool if he did and would be ridiculed by his friends and neighbors. He must be sure of his resources before starting the project.

From this perspective, the point that Jesus was driving at – the punch-line, so to speak – becomes clear. Nobody in his right mind would become his disciple without counting the cost. He would be a fool if he did so. The point becomes crystal-clear even to the most ignorant.

C. The point of the two parables read at the beginning of this sermon is equally clear:

- (1) Which of you here would not be overjoyed if you found a treasure in a field? You would leap for the joy of it.
- (2) Which of you, if you were a dealer in pearls and found one pearl of great value, would not be filled with joy? Again you would leap for the joy of it.

Jesus paints it that the kingdom of God is of such a nature that he who finds it experiences so great a joy, that all other joys fall into the background.

It is even more: all other values are sacrificed for this great value. *“The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field”*. You cannot be a spectator any more. You have to investigate.

II. This is a parable of the kingdom of God. What does the phrase “kingdom of God” mean? For us the term “kingdom of God” is a vague, empty expression, conveying hardly any significant content. But the expression is highly significant in the Bible.

A. The Kingdom of God is praised in the Psalms and prophets.

(1) Psalm 145:10-13

“All thy works shall give thanks to thee, O Lord; and all thy saints shall bless thee! They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom and tell of thy power to make known to the sons of men thy mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of thy kingdom. Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endures throughout all generations.”

(2) Psalm 103:19 *“The Lord has established his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom rules over all.”*

(3) Every year the ancient Israelites celebrated in their worship God’s enthronement, his ascending to be king of the nations, his victory over all his enemies (Ps. 47, 93, 96, etc.).

- (4) Even those who are undergoing suffering and torment at the time of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century B.C., can break into joy when they ponder the fact that God reigns. The prophet of the exile says: *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who published salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”* These statements are not merely an acknowledgment of God’s reign for the present, but are at the same time an expression of hope. They are affirmations that God is the Lord of this present world and will not remain forever far off, but will reveal himself and vindicate his word.

B. Jesus and the kingdom

In the words and deeds of Jesus the kingdom of God is dawning and nevertheless, it is a future reality which is yet to come.

- (1) Jesus says: *“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”* The shift of the ages is here. The kingdom of God is already dawning in my deeds and words. This is a serious matter. *“Blessed is he who takes no offense in me.”* (Mt. 11:6)

Blessing upon the eyewitnesses who understand the meaning of this hour: *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”* (Lk 10:33f.)

- (2) But Jesus is no apocalyptic seer who is carried off to heaven and allowed to behold the fall of the demonic powers and the dawning of the messianic splendor, and to whom the secrets of the final drama of the world are revealed by one of the heavenly spirits.

“What distinguishes Jesus from these seers” – says a modern N.T. scholar – “is that he himself enters the battlefield. God’s victory over Satan takes place in his words and deeds; it is in them that the signs of this victory are erected.”

“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Lk 11:20)

Where is the kingdom and when would it come? ask the Pharisees. *“The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘there’, for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”*

- (3) The signs of the Kingdom

- a. The message: *“Blessed are you poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you that hunger now: for you shall be satisfied.
Blessed are you that weep now: for you shall laugh.”*

The poor and they that mourn are those who have nothing to expect from the world, but who expect everything from God – in their lives and in their attitudes they are beggars before God.

In other words, they have no righteousness of their own and can only trust in God. This is a message of joy and hope for the disinherited. They are the blessed.

b. The deeds

- (1) Jesus has table fellowship with publicans and sinners. Table fellowship was then a symbol of the closest fellowship with God. God in Jesus is breaking in the walls of exclusivism. The righteous are out; the so-called unrighteous are in. The first shall be the last and the last shall be the first.

Yet there is no sentimentalism of the noble savage type of the 18th century, nor of the social outcast type of shallow liberalism. The moral demand remains rigorous.

- (2) The publican Zaccheus is in: *“Today salvation has come to this house. He is also a son of Abraham.”* And Zaccheus responds: *“Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”* There is immeasurable joy here.
- (3) The woman who was a sinner brought an alabaster flask and anoints the feet of the Lord. She experiences forgiveness. Her sins were many. There is joy here.
- (4) The hated Samaritan is in.
- (5) There is the healing of the sick.

There is joy here all over the place. God was stepping into history, so to speak, and bringing forgiveness, reconciliation, health and salvation to broken humanity. Those who responded to Jesus’ deeds and words found the treasure of treasures. Their joy was so great that they gave up everything else for the kingdom.

III. Where is the treasure now? The treasure has been entrusted to us.

1. It is in the Scriptures.
2. It is in the worshipping community, singing, praying, giving thanks, eating together. The treasure is here.
3. It is in the serving community. The church cannot be a club. It has to be open to all people. It has to serve.

Let us not lament the fact that we are small. The early church was a small group. But they knew what God had given them in Jesus Christ. This church needs to realize anew the tremendous spiritual resources that God has put in our hands – but all this must be realized in humility and meekness.

God is acting in our midst – redeeming, healing, transforming. We give thanks, we rejoice, we are not dismayed, we see the victory in the midst of tribulation and death. We say victoriously: If God be for us, who can be against us? – but again in humility and meekness.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Conclusion

Just the very fact that we are singing reflects our commitment. We could be complaining, or cursing, or renegeing. But we have come to praise, not our own achievements but God’s doing and being. The simple act of singing has a transcendental reference. We are not praising nature. We are addressing our worship to our Lord and Creator.

I have not come to proclaim my ideas. I proclaim God’s act of salvation – the treasure hidden in a human life and now present in the proclamation.

We pray because we are beset by temptation, by weakness, by sin, by death.

This is thanksgiving and praise, because we have tasted of the powers of the age to come and can only say with the apostle: *“Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.”*

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