

July 24, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Parables of God's Realm

Psalm 105:3-4 *Seek the Lord and his strength; seek God's presence continually.*

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 *The kingdom of heaven is like....*

Jesus was all about the kingdom of God. Soon as he was baptized, he started preaching and teaching about it everywhere he went [Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; in Luke 4, Jesus announces God's reign in terms of Isaiah's prophecy]. Jesus did not point to himself but to God and God's kingdom. He saw God's kingdom everywhere. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field could teach us about God's kingdom if we were open to it. Honoring children would bring us closer to the kingdom, because Jesus believed the kingdom already belongs to children and those who become like them. Jesus said the kingdom is very near us, even within us (Luke 17:21). He called people to repent, to wake up, to change the way they look at life and live. Jesus believed that people could discover for themselves what the kingdom of God is about and then live in harmony with it. Jesus never directly says what the kingdom is, not in a way that we can grasp it or build it. When we try to build God's kingdom, we end up building our own kingdoms, not God's. Religions and churches are very good at that these days. And yet, the kingdom of God has a definite landscape. It is the deepest truth about life and about us. It is how God made the world to work--in peace, justice, compassion, and relationships of love and service, not violence, power, and greed. The kingdom of God is not idealism; it is the true nature of reality. Jesus calls us to discover and live it for ourselves, and to do so in community.

Matthew gives us a cluster of Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God, or as Matthew likes to call it, the kingdom of heaven. Parables are intended to open up our thinking, even to dismantle our conventional thinking, so that we get insight, so that we become aware. Parables are not about intellectual knowledge, but about waking up to the reality of God's realm, present with us

and in us and all around us.

The first two parables are about **the growth of the kingdom**. It is like a tiny seed that grows into a tree big enough to shelter the birds. It is about a bit of leaven mixed with flour to make it rise into a loaf of bread. The kingdom is about tiny beginnings and mysterious growth that we can neither explain nor control, to which we can only give ourselves. As "kingdom people," we must always cherish the small seeds that we plant or are planted in us. The ministries or missions we embark need to be focused on the one need or person or vision. What became Camp Kum-Ba-Yah began as a little recreation program in the basement of the Cosby family home, and one question: Where will the children play? The Wood Ministry, in its day, began with one woman in the central city desperate for firewood to heat her home and to cook with during an extremely cold winter. What became L'Arche Blue Ridge Mountains germinated for over twenty years before the first gathering of the community. The Haven continues to work with the specific vision of a place for persons in recovery to continue their new lives in a safe, supportive environment. So it has been with the Festival Center, Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center, and other ministries. Small beginnings, faithfully nourished and nurtured by commitment and the opening up of our lives makes it possible for God to work through us. In our missions, though great care may be taken for planning and working with details, the heart of it is opening ourselves up to what we believe God wants to bring about THROUGH us. It is about what is being done THROUGH US as we make room in our lives for it and give ourselves to it. And we never know where it is going to go! We have to remain ready for and open to anything.

It happens in people's lives. When someone who has never practiced silence or tried to become inwardly quiet does so for the first time, on a retreat or beginning a daily time of inward journey practice for even a few minutes, it is a small thing. Yet it soon opens up a whole new way of living, one that is more peaceful, insightful, and joyful. The small beginnings of a personal inward journey move pretty quickly to a whole new way of life and way of seeing ourselves, others, and the world.

The kingdom of God is organic, not mechanical. It is something alive and

growing. There is a dynamic energy about the way the world truly is, the way God made it to be. God made us to be persons and communities who harmonize our lives with that deepest nature of things, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. We pay attention to the smallest of beginnings, are faithful to them, and we follow them wherever they lead, however they grow. And, according to these two little parables, the growth is a sure thing, though it may not be the kind of growth we expected or wanted! The realm of God, the way of life as God made it, will proceed and grow and come to fullness, in spite of everything that seems to thwart it.

Jesus tells two parables about **valuing the kingdom of God**. The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. A person stumbles over it, covers it up, and goes and sells everything in order to buy the field. There is a hiddenness about the kingdom. Though it is everywhere, even within us, it is not evident to everyone. Jesus several times talked about this hiddenness of the kingdom. Not everyone sees it. Not everyone finds it. Not everyone understands it. You have to look below the surface. You have to WANT to find it and be willing to be changed by it.

Searching for fine pearls, the merchant discovers one of surpassing value, then sells his whole inventory to buy it. Here is an intentional search for what is most valuable. I think this is an affirmation of the kind of spiritual life we try to work with here. A life of commitment to following Jesus, a life with spiritual practices, or disciplines, that keep us on that journey of seeking and finding. It doesn't just happen by itself. There are too many things about our culture, and within us, that work against a life centered on finding and living out of God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is always there, always real and growing. However, in order to touch it, perceive it, and give our lives to it, we need to give our lives a pattern and shape that keep us focused on that search and on the letting go of things that get in the way.

The Soul of the Indian, is a book by a Native American named Charles Eastman, whose Indian name was Ohiyesa. It was published in 1911, to tell of the spirituality of the native people of this land. The Indian was astonished by what he saw in the whites who came to "save" him. They heard the teachings of Jesus about

the dangers of wealth and power, and fully agreed with them. They, too, believed these things, and practiced them. However, Indians did not see this practiced by the ones who told them their salvation depended on accepting another religion. The Indian lived a materially simple life, one of cooperation and sharing, and had a deep and real sense of the Great Mystery—God—without feeling the need to talk about it! If only all of us Christians devoted ourselves more to living the life Jesus pointed to instead of promoting a religion! This would be giving all we have in order to possess the treasure and the pearl of God's realm, God's way of life for us.

At the heart of it all is JOY. With joy the person goes and sells everything in order to buy the field where the treasure is. Finding the pearl of surpassing value, the merchant joyfully sells everything else in order to possess it. There is joy because what we discover is the richest, deepest, and fullest meaning of this life. We discover what makes it all worthwhile and full of purpose. It is the joy that floods into us when we connect with another person at the level of love, of mutual understanding, respect, and caring. It is the joy that arises in us when, through some person or experience, we really feel that we are accepted and loved as we are, so that God's grace is no longer just an idea but a reality that surrounds and enfolds us. It is the joy that comes when we give ourselves to some mission of sharing our gifts with the world, touching a need somewhere, a joy that sustains and undergirds us in that work when things get difficult. It is the joy that comes when we, bit by bit, grow beyond our egos into the true Self found in community.

The last parable is the seine net that scoops up “every kind of fish.” It isn't particular and selective. This is a figure for **God's expansive and inclusive love**, a great net thrown out over the whole world. The word of the kingdom of God is for everyone who will respond to it, whoever they may be. Ours is not to decide who is right for it and who is not, who is good enough or moral enough or theologically correct. Ours is to respond ourselves to the kingdom and to let it grow in our own lives.

Religious communities in our society and world fall so quickly into division and collecting themselves into self-righteous groups. Christianity is the worst of the bunch! This little parable speaks against all of that. The kingdom of God, the

realm of God's love, is thrown over ALL people. So should ours be. The ultimate judgment of good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, faithful and unfaithful has nothing to do with us. Our job is not to decide who is in and who is out, or that the rainbow trout is beautiful and the bottom feeding carp is ugly. The net of God's reign gathers everyone in, and the parable is absolutely clear that the final assessment of who is a "good fish" and who is a "bad fish" is up to God, not us.

These little parables are pearls of insight for our community. They speak of the hiddenness and preciousness of God's reign, of the importance of the search for it and the giving of our whole lives to it. They speak of how things begin in small ways, when we give ourselves to the call of God in our lives to offer our gifts in some way in the service of life. They affirm the importance of that search as the central journey of our lives, guided and supported by spiritual practices that keep us focused and centered. They remind us that God's love, God's realm, is for everyone, not just a few and not just those who think themselves special. And perhaps most important of all, these little stories remind us to keep in touch with the joy that comes as we seek and discover the true nature of life itself and our own lives—the realm of God's love that is our true home.