

Sermon – Matthew 13:31-31, 44-52; Romans 8:26-39

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“Unburied Treasure”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. How do we tell a story that is already so well known? That question was on my mind this past week as my family and I settled into our seats to watch the new film version of *The Odyssey*. I’d read plenty about the movie and its production online; the internet is suddenly filled with “experts” on Homer and his poetry. More to the point, I’d read the work in full, albeit thirty years ago. The broad contours of the story were imbedded in my memory, through my own reading and because so much of the poem is baked into our common cultural knowledge. Sure, I didn’t remember a lot of the details, but I knew the story and its ending. I’m mindful of the old joke: Odysseus stands on the shore, recruiting men for his journey. “Who will join me on this Odyssey?” “Well, we don’t know. What’s an Odyssey?” “It’s an epic journey named for the only survivor; who’s with me?” Could the director tell the tale in a way that was compelling? Or would it fall flat like so much old news?

2. At first glance, we might ask similar questions of today’s parables. We know them so well, after all. And there’s not much to them. These are not well-developed stories with character and conflict; more a rapid-fire procession of images. The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, sure. And yeast and a pearl and treasure and a net. Is there something new to hear here? The good news is that, from the mouth of Jesus, the good news is always good, and it’s always news. The parables themselves, familiar as they are, remind us that

God's work is often hidden but always surprising. Jesus invites us to listen anew: The Kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed that holds within it room for all of the birds of the air to nest. The Kingdom is like yeast, kneaded lovingly by a woman into the flour until it is leavened for growth. The Kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field, so valuable that it makes the whole field priceless. The Kingdom is like a pearl of such worth that a man would give up everything in order to obtain it. The Kingdom is like a net dragged in the sea, collecting *everything* in its wake. The Kingdom, Jesus wants to make clear, is full of surprises. The Kingdom might not look like much, but in its smallness, its ordinariness, its seeming worthlessness, the Kingdom is *already* present and active, transforming this world through the word and work of Jesus Christ, buried pervasively and close to the surface of everyday life.

3. This Kingdom, you see, is not like the one you and I would build, grand and easy. But it is the Kingdom we need, we who live in the constant pressure of daily life, in the fear of expanding war, in the shadow of nuclear proliferation and climate distress. It is not a Kingdom that grows out of our best efforts and success, but in the very soil of sin, suffering, and death. The Kingdom, Jesus proclaims today, is buried deep in the needs of this world. Jesus, God's own priceless treasure, becomes the insignificant seed, tossed away and left for dead. But like bread given for the world, Jesus rises, and casts behind him the net that will drag all creation into the presence of the creator God.
4. The Kingdom is, in fact, most clearly revealed in the most hidden of manners. Who would have imagined that the death of a Jewish rabbi would be the way in which God most clearly reveals the breadth and depth of the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom that neither places demands upon us nor waits for our sin and suffering to pass. No, in the suffering and death of Jesus, God has entered all the way in, all the way down, into our sin and suffering and death – both to redeem us from sin, suffering, and death *and* to gift us with the promise

that God is with us in the midst of all we endure. To proclaim to us the grace to know that God is with us; nothing can therefore stand against us.

5. This grace is now the very air we breathe, the sea in which we swim. I read this week of a Moravian bakery in Winston-Salem, North Carolina that's been in business since 1807. It is said that at the Winkler Bakery, you could put raw dough in the rafters, and it would soon start to rise. After more than 200 years, yeast has so permeated the very structure and space that it begins its work on the dough automatically. This is a parable for our ears, that this world is so shot through with the grace of Jesus, crucified and raised, that we cannot help but rise along with him.

6. Within this grace is the call to work. The mustard seed must be planted. The dough won't knead itself. We are invited to join this work, but we answer the call in the joyful knowledge that success is not up to us and the work may be difficult, at times, but never burdensome. Another parable perhaps? The Kingdom of heaven is like an Easter egg hunt for a toddler, in which the child delightfully finds that which is hidden in plain sight, not really hidden at all. Our task is not to imagine that the work depends on us; it is to be busy pointing out all the God is already doing and joyfully joining in. This morning, earlier than I care to think about, Erika and I brought Greta to Grace. By 6:00 a.m., three vans were loaded with 19 youth and six chaperones, including Pastor Troy, who are right now on their way to Jonesville, VA, to serve the people there through Appalachia Service Project, of ASP. It is such a blessing to serve a mission-minded church and to know that our young people have opportunities to witness and work for the sake of the Kingdom by serving their neighbors. Who knows what hidden treasures will be unearthed in their lives, how they will be transformed for faithful discipleship for years to come? We do not know at the start of the week what the Spirit has in store for them, but we know the Spirit is up to something. The Kingdom, after all, is always bursting forth in the most surprising ways.

7. Jesus invites us to hope today. Hope that declares that there is nothing in life, and nothing in death, that can separate us from the love of God that is for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing. We move forward with the joy of knowing and serving a God who is always at work, no matter how small or hidden it may seem to us. We trust the future, whatever may come, because the future belongs to God. Thinking again of *The Odyssey*, there is a point in the poem, after having endured so much for so long, at which Odysseus faces a new challenge upon arriving at home. He says to himself, "Take courage, my heart; you have been through worse than this." It's no wonder he inspired the Stoics who came later. Our hope in Christ is of a different nature, for it lives outside ourselves and depends not upon our successes or failures. Our future is not a fate to accept but a promise to receive. Take courage, friends, for God has seen you through thus far, and God will never let you go. So come once more and receive Jesus and his promise. He's hiding, but he's not doing a very good job of it. He tells us right where to find him. In simple bread, simple wine, he gives himself to you again today. The treasure is unearthed, and you will rise, and that good news is always brand new. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.