

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020

(Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52)

I'll say at the outset that my sermon changed as I was writing it. I found myself moving from a very particular set of questions that I started with to a completely unexpected answer at the end. For me, it was a strong example of how reflection and thought lead to revelation, often in the most unexpected moments. So allow me to invite you to walk this path from question to unexpected answer.

In the beginning, the Alpha moment, I found that today's passage from Matthew really annoyed me. I wasn't frustrated because of what's *there*, but rather because of what's *missing*. As important as the Sunday lectionary cycle is for providing scriptural structure for the church year, there's one thing I don't like about it. Several times – and this reading is a good example of that – important transitional passages are left out. Verses relating to a shift in location, voice or audience are simply excluded or are used in readings for other weeks.

In this morning's reading, the first three verses are a continuation of a long series of parables that Jesus has shared with the crowds – yes, "crowds" plural – gathered around him. The very beginning of the chapter reveals that the crowds are of such an enormous size that Jesus has to get into a boat and go out from the shore so he can address them. Throughout the chapter, and including the three verses we just heard on the kingdom of heaven being compared to a mustard seed, the crowd is hearing parables based on things that would have been familiar to them.

Parables are ways of sharing deeper spiritual meanings through familiar stories of everyday life, and it's those familiar things they're hearing Jesus speak of here – seeds and sowers, weeds and grain, different types of soil, baking and fishing. The mustard seed itself with which we begin would itself have been a well-known image to them, an image of something so incredibly tiny that grows into something of tremendous size – about 10 feet in height in areas near the Sea of Galilee.<sup>1</sup>

And then he's talking about the kingdom of heaven as a hidden treasure that's discovered and sold ... and a pearl that's been found and bought ... and an abundance of fish being separated, the good from the bad. To hear all of it straight through, as it is structured for the lectionary, we might think nothing has changed and the teaching of the crowds is continuing uninterrupted. If you dig a little you discover *a lot* has changed. What I find odd and problematic is that those important transitional phrases ... those indications of *what* has changed ... were from *last week's reading* and included in the text on which Melanie preached.

How helpful can this possibly be for someone who missed last week's reading and yet is hearing today's? How helpful can it be for one to be aware of the change that has occurred and another to think that everything continues as it always has?

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann. *Matthew*, n. 32, p. 169.

For instance, between his words on leavened flower and those on treasure hidden in a field, Jesus stopped talking to the crowds. In fact, he's come back to shore, left the boat and gone into the house. The parables being shared for a bulk of this passage are for the benefit of the disciples, not the crowds who had gathered. Additionally, we miss an important verse that identifies the actions of Jesus as being the fulfillment of Hebrew tradition – namely, his use of parables as a hearkening back to the words of Isaiah and of Psalm 78.

In my view, the transition of place and audience are particularly important in today's reading. What Jesus is sharing with his disciples in the final verses is that inheriting the kingdom that God has promised will require **everything** from us, like the one who sold everything he had to buy a treasure-laden field or the other who sold all he had to buy a pearl. "The kingdom is a treasure, and those who really believe it will sacrifice everything else in their lives for the Kingdom's agenda."<sup>2</sup> Yes, that idea would end up holding particular and strong relevance for the lives of the 12, many of whom would themselves be martyred because of their work in carrying the message of the kingdom to the far corners of the known world.

What Jesus is sharing as well is the idea of judgment and of the revelation of "who was truly committed to the kingdom, and how wise the committed were to invest their lives in it."<sup>3</sup> Using the imagery of fishing, the good fish – the righteous – would be kept while the bad fish – those deemed to be wicked – would be cast aside. And finally, Jesus is sharing the necessity to the disciples of taking what is learned and being "prepared to teach others the value of the kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

But isn't it also relevant and important to **everyone** who would follow Jesus, disciples and crowds alike, both in his time and ours?

And here I reached my Omega moment. The answer to that question is "yes," and it is precisely because the answer **is** yes that the transition verses that I so desperately wanted to be part of the boundaries of today's reading would have been ... well, they would have been **wrong**.

The transition from boat to shore and to house would have been wrong. The shift in teaching from crowds to disciples would have been wrong. Why? Because in eliminating those slight transitions we also find the elimination of **distinctions**. In eliminating those transitions we remove the importance of place and audience and shift the focus to **the message**. In eliminating those transitions we see that the words of Jesus are for everyone ... the crowds and the disciples, the named and the anonymous, the sowers and the fishermen, the farmers and the bakers.

God's message isn't a message for **some**; it is a message for **all**.

We are, as a parish **and** a world, in a time of transition – and with that transition has admittedly come pain. The months of pandemic and separation have caused grief and opened wounds – the wounds and grief of canceled gatherings, missed companionship,

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<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 391.

<sup>3</sup> Keener, p. 392.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, p. 393.

distant community and the absence of our shared life at the altar rail. These months have also laid bare the wider wounds and grief of inequality in this country and deepened divisions – inequality that had long been overlooked or cast aside and divisions that are both new and which have been simmering just below the surface.

***We are hurting. We are suffering.*** Despite that, there is good news ... that good news that there is ***hope and a promise.***

The ***hope*** is that we will use this time to learn and to grow ... to overcome obstacles ... to work for the healing of our bodies and our world and at last reach the time when “barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease [and] that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace.”<sup>5</sup>

The ***promise*** is the message that is found in the parables of the past several Sundays and in my discovery that transitional verses aren’t always important. The promise is that that the message is for ***all*** ... the kingdom can be for ***all*** ... and that we can achieve the kingdom if we give our ***all***.

What will the kingdom look like for you?

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> “Prayer for Social Justice.” *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 823.