



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Learning to See
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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When I was little, I loved birds. There is a story in my family that some of my first words were “pine siskin.” That’s a type of bird. And the story goes, I called every bird a pine siskin. It didn’t matter if it was a sparrow or a robin or a cardinal; to me, it was a pine siskin. As we would drive down the road, I would incessantly call out at every bird I saw, “Pine siskin, pine siskin, pine siskin!”

My grandparents, on the other hand, were expert bird watchers and avid members of the Audubon Society. They knew bird calls, bird habits, and even the scientific names of birds. To them, the bird world was full of variety – not just full of pine siskins. They saw the world through a particular lens; one that I did not possess.

Expertise in any field often reveals a level of complexity and beauty in the world that is unseen by the untrained eye. An architect appreciates things in a building that are invisible to the rest of us. A doctor sees things about the human body that most of us would miss. Go on a walk with a botanist or geologist, and you just may be astounded at what you’ve been missing.

Developing expertise is not the only way of gaining a new lens on the world. For example, buy a white car, and suddenly, you begin to notice white cars everywhere. Fall off a curb and sprain an ankle, and suddenly there are tripping hazards all over the place. But whether they develop because of expertise or experience, our lenses shape the world we see. They cause us to see some things - and to miss others.

I bring all this up because I think part of the reconciling work Jesus came to do was to give us a new lens, a lens that allows us to see the kingdom of heaven more clearly, right here, in this world.

The kingdom of heaven, here, in this world? We may think of heaven as somewhere else, a place we go after we die, some place in the future. And while our tradition does hold hope that we are moving toward a time when God makes all things right and all are united with God, I don't think that is what Jesus is talking about here.

Notice, in both last week's and this week's readings, Jesus talks about the "kingdom of heaven" as separate from and preceding the "end of the age". "The end of the age," that's off in the future. But when Jesus says, "Let me tell you about the kingdom of heaven," he seems to be describing the world which we inhabit, here and now. And Jesus works hard to reveal this to us.

Consider our reading today from Mark. It contains five parables about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. The kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that catches every kind of fish. Whew.

Why so many? Perhaps because, evidently, as a people, we tend to overlook, or maybe even never learned to see, this important fact about the world: that it has never been separated from God, from the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wants us to see this.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, a seed so tiny that it is almost hidden. And yet, it grows into a large and sturdy tree. If Jesus is trying to give us a new lens with which to see the world, then we can say – ah – the kingdom of heaven may be almost hidden, but it is here in this world, and it holds the potential for creating life in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. Again, tiny, seemingly inert. And yet with the power to transform the stable elements of flour and water. And once it is mixed in, it can't be taken out. This is where we live - a place where God is inherently mixed up with the world, everywhere, not just in the good places, but in the hard places, too.

The kingdom of heaven is also a treasure. And where is it? Far away? In some distant cave? No, it's right here, buried in the middle of an open field. We don't always see it, but when we finally look through the right lens, we find it, and then nothing else matters except this knowledge that is God already hidden in this world.

Okay, Jesus says, if we're really thick and still don't get it, even after the seeds and the yeast and the treasure, then surely, we can understand this. The kingdom of heaven is the most valuable pearl, the one the pearl merchant has been searching for his whole life. And there it is, just sitting at the market. He doesn't have to do any hard work to get it – no diving, no oyster-shucking. All he has to do is let go of the other stuff he thought

was valuable. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus is saying, that one thing we have been looking for our whole lives: it is here - waiting. Right in front of us.

And then, just for good measure, Jesus throws in one more, the parable of the net. The kingdom of heaven holds everything – the good, the bad, the sinner, the saint. It holds it all, in this one net – in God’s love.

Jesus’ desire to teach us how to see must have been burning in him, because he is adamant about getting the idea across to us that we are in God’s kingdom of heaven: in every situation, it is floating through the air like seeds, bubbling up like yeast, enriching like a newly discovered treasure, the one thing we have been seeking our whole life, infusing and permeating and holding everything.

Theologian Robert Capon says that this kingdom Jesus is describing – where God is here among us – has always been that way: There, in the beginning, was the Word, when the Spirit moved over creation; when God longed to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening; when God made covenants with Moses and Abraham, spoke through the prophets, and was revealed through the life of Jesus. Not one scrap of this world has ever been left unseeded, unleavened, and un-treasured. We just don’t always see. And so, we may start to imagine that we are separate from God’s kingdom. But we are not.

In fact, there is nothing we must do to become residents of the kingdom - citizenship is our right by birth, if only we can open our eyes to it.

Jesus is offering us a lens, and with it, we will not only see ourselves as citizens of the kingdom, but also all those around us. The friend and the loved one, and also, the enemy and the stranger. Those who are joyful and easy to love, and also those who are difficult and harder to love. We are all caught up together in the net of the kingdom of heaven.

Seeing this way changes everything. It reconciles us to God, to ourselves, to each other, and to our world. Just imagine what every situation would feel like if we saw God present in it.

And here’s the last beautiful part: Each time we choose to see through this lens, we make the kingdom that much more visible to the rest of the world. It spreads and grows through us, and then we, as individuals and as members of St. Mark’s, become a place for others to rest and grow. That is the kingdom of heaven.

I never did become an expert birder like my grandparents, but a few years ago, our family got interested in mushrooms. We read books, looked at pictures, and went on walks to collect fungi. We were amazed at how many different types of mushrooms we found, how many we had never noticed before. Now, everywhere we go, we are awake

to that variety. We have gained a lens through which to see. And it's like the world has been made new again – full of vibrancy and mystery. So if there's anyone out there who still doesn't get it, how about one more parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a family that searches for mushrooms, only to find they are everywhere.