

As the days get shorter and the temperature drops lower, we know that the end of the year is drawing near. Especially for those of us in the Church, whose worship follows the liturgical calendar, the end of the year is coming even sooner. Next week is the last Sunday of the Christian year--the last Sunday before Advent. Traditionally, that Sunday is celebrated as Christ the King Sunday, a day on which we remember Christ's rule of earth and heaven--a day on which we sing of the great hymns of the church: the oldie goldies like "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" or "Rejoice, the Lord is King," or "Crown Him with Many Crowns." And every year on Christ the King Sunday, when I when I was growing up, I left church feeling like I knew a little more about Jesus and his kingship. But I didn't often hear much talk about us, about the people of God, about the Body of Christ. On Christ the King Sunday, I was left wondering what on earth the *Kingdom* looks like.

If Jesus Christ is King, then what does the Kingdom look like?

Now don't get me wrong, it's not that I want ignore the claim that Christ is King. I don't want to ever lose hold of the confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord." When we in the church are tempted to be pulled into any number of different idolatries, any number of different "isms," we cannot forget that our identity lies in this common confession of Christ. In an upcoming holiday season which puts tremendous emphasis on buying, purchasing, and consuming we cannot forget that Christ is Lord. In a politically charged culture that seeks to create division over every issue and tempts us to put all our trust in one way of seeing the world--in a time like this we cannot forget that Christ is Lord. As we prepare for the upcoming season of Advent and the hopeful expectation we have for the birth of the Messiah, we cannot forget that Christ is Lord. In such a time as this, the confession that Christ is King is something that we cannot forget.

But, still I wonder.... with all this talk about Christ being our king, what does the Kingdom look like?

Certainly, Kingdom talk is all around us, especially in church. In the Prayer of Confession this morning we confessed that we "**proclaim [the] kingdom with our lips and voices, but not so much with our living.**" Later we will pray in that familiar prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And sometimes, if we listen closely, we'll even hear people who have had an intensely meaningful experience say that they had "a glimpse of the Kingdom." This kind of Kingdom talk isn't anything new. Even before Jesus was on the scene, John the Baptist was preaching "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

And yet, I have to confess, as prevalent as all this Kingdom Talk is, especially in the church, it's never really been that helpful for me. When people say they have had a "glimpse of the kingdom" I've always wondered, "What was it that they really saw?" When we pray thy will be done on earth, I wonder, "What do we really mean by that?" And when John the Baptist says, "the kingdom of God is at hand, "I wonder, "What does it look like, sound like, feel like, or even smell like?" I hear kingdom talk all around me sometimes, but still I'm left wondering.

So today, as a way of preparing for next week's celebration of Christ the King Sunday, I'd like to look with you at what Jesus says the kingdom of God looks like. In our text today, Jesus says very simply that the kingdom of God is like a treasure in a field, a merchant in search of pearls, and a fishing net. Well, that's not confusing at all is it? All we have to do is imagine a merchant walking through a field of buried treasure looking for pearls with a fishing net, and there we have it, that's what the kingdom of God must look like. Makes perfect sense doesn't it?...Hardly. Actually, it makes me even more confused than I was before we started looking.

And, if we consult the rest of the Gospel stories for help about the kingdom the vision gets even blurrier. Just within the Gospel of Mathew, Jesus tells us that the kingdom looks like a farmer, a mustard seed, yeast, ten bridesmaids, a king, a vineyard, and a wedding banquet. So, if we cram all that together in on picture it looks like...I can't do it. It's impossible to imagine a picture with all these images.

And even if we could, is that it? Is that what the Kingdom of heaven looks like? It's pretty hard to see a whole vineyard and a tiny mustard seed at the same time. It's hard to smell a fishnet, a farmer, and a king in one sniff. I can't even grasp what ten bridesmaids, a wedding banquet, and a buried treasure sounds like. How can the kingdom feel like a pearl, a net, and a pile of yeast all at the same time? The diversity of images is mind boggling. It's impossible tell what all these things have in common, let alone what they have to do with the Kingdom of God.

So then, what on earth does the kingdom look like?! If anyone ever knew it was surely Jesus, and yet he chose to tell us about the kingdom by using parables. Many great teachers throughout the ages have taught by telling stories, but Jesus is different: he doesn't just tell stories, he tells parables these confusing, complicated tales. Biblical scholar C. H. Dodd defines parable as **“a metaphor or simile drawn from common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”** In other words, parables are little stories that just don't make sense. Jesus chose to tell us about the kingdom by stretching our senses, by blurring our vision, and by confusing our logical way of thinking about things. He told us about the kingdom in a way that he knew we wouldn't get. You see, these parables start by taking something that seems so ordinary like a tree, a dog, a family meal, or a business meeting. Then, parables take that ordinary thing that we think we understand and they twist, turn spin, joggle, jumble, shake it up and spit it out as something new, something strange, something that doesn't make sense. Mustard seeds don't grow into trees bigger than all the others. No one in their right mind sows seeds by just throwing them all over the place, or sells everything they own to buy one pearl, or lets weeds grow up with their crops. No fisherman has a net that will catch every kind of fish at the same time. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a field, a pearl, and a net. He might as well have said, “the kingdom of God is like $2+2=700$,” or “the kingdom of God is like driving a car upside down,” or “the kingdom of God is like a quarterback hitting a hole in one with a tennis racket.”

Jesus tells us these parables that he knows don't make sense. And he does so to confuse us, to make us question what we thought we knew so well, to leave us dissatisfied with the world as we see it. So, if we want to know what the kingdom of heaven looks like, should we listen to these parables, when we know that Jesus is stretching the truth, or at least stretching our sense of the truth?

In one of my favorite episodes of the Andy Griffith Show, Opie (an 8 year old boy) is telling his father Andy about someone that he met that day named Mr. McBeavy. Opie says that Mr. McBeavy walks around the tree tops, wears a big shiny silver hat, has twelve extra hands, can make smoke come out of his ears, and jingles when he walks as if he had “rings on his fingers and bells on his shoes.” Now, his father Andy is convinced that Opie has imagined this Mr. McBeavy fellow. As the show continues, Andy becomes worried that Opie isn't just imagining things, but that he is “stretching the truth all out of shape” by lying to his father and blaming things on this Mr. McBeavy. In the crucial scene of the show, Andy goes upstairs with the intention of “whipping” Opie for lying, but then a few minutes later he comes back downstairs having decided not to punish his son. Barney (one of the other characters) says,

“Andy, do you mean that you believe there is a Mr. McBeavy?” Andy responds, “No, but I do believe in Opie.” No, but I do believe in Opie. Now, as it turns out, Mr. McBeavy was really a man who worked on telephone lines “up in the tree tops” and his “extra hands” were the tools that he carried on his belt. But, at the time, Andy didn’t know any of this. Andy was willing to be left in the dark, left confused, left wondering about the truth because he believed in his son.

When Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a field or a merchant or a net, it may not make any sense at all to us. It may sound just as nonsensical as a man who walks in the trees and has 12 extra hands. We know, for certain, that what Jesus is saying isn’t really how the world works. But, because we believe in the person who tells us the parables, because we confess that Christ is King, we are called to see listen to what he says about the Kingdom, even it doesn’t make any sense to us at all.

You see, in talking about the Kingdom of God, Jesus never said that it would all make sense. He never said that he would shed light on the subject and it would be crystal clear. He never said that if we listen to what he says, everything will start to fit together and all our questions will be answered. No, he spoke in parables and then explained his teaching style with the words, “**seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.**” Jesus tells us about the kingdom in ways that he knows will provoke our minds into active thought. He teaches in a way that he knows will cause us to ask even more questions. The King tells us about the Kingdom in this strange way so that we might see the world differently!! And he does this because he knows that our clouded vision needs to be corrected. No one in their right mind would believe these stories that he tells, and yet, it is precisely to get us out of our right mind that he tell them. He shatters our way of seeing the world as black and white, good and evil, right and wrong, so that we aren’t willing to settle for the easy answers, and so that one day we might be able to perceive the deep mystery of love that is the Kingdom of God. Jesus turns the world upside down on us, so that as we look for the kingdom we will have to turn upside down our world, our priorities, our values, and our expectations about how God is at work in the ordinary things around us.

And so, today, as we go from this place of worship let us start looking for the kingdom as Parable People. Let us start looking around us for the kingdom of God’ love. And if we don’t see it at first (since we won’t) let’s start turning over ever rock and every leaf until we find it. Let’s turn upside down our budgets and our career plans to see if its somewhere in there. Let’s look under the sofa and under our desks. Let’s look under the assumptions we make about who is important and who isn’t. Let’s look under the poverty line and see if it’s there. Let’s look behind the refrigerator and behind the bookcase. Let’s look behind prison walls. Let’s look in the back our closet or the bottom of our suit cases. Let’s look at the back of priorities and the bottom of the social structures we set up. Let’s look in cabinets and in our school lockers. Let’s look in our hearts and in the eyes of the people sitting next to us in the pew. As we look, let us continue to pray for new vision, let us continue to ask, “Open my eyes that I may see...”

For we will never in this life be able to fully see the kingdom of God, but if we keep looking, if we keep letting the parables of Christ work in us, we begin to see our questions and wonderings as gifts from God, then we will keep changing the way we see the world and how we see God at work in it—just as Christ hoped we would. Friends, the Good News of the Gospel is that Christ is king...The King, and thanks be to God that we have to look for the Kingdom of God’s love around us. Amen.