

“The Bible: The Reign of God”
Matthew 13:31-33, 45-46

Today we begin looking at the great themes of scripture in the New Testament/Christian Scriptures. One of the overarching themes of the ministry of Jesus is that of the Kingdom or Reign of God where people trust God wholeheartedly. Jesus spent a lot of his ministry teaching about this and wanted his community to continue to spread this vision around the world after his death and resurrection. The Church is supposed to be a witness to that vision of life and faith. The Church is to be a sign of the reign of God that was breaking into the world.

Yet, in looking at the realities of our world, it is hard to see the reign of God in the midst of human cruelty and fear. It is also sad to see the Church, which is supposed to be a sign of the reign of God, failing dramatically on many levels with rampant corruption and with spreading hate instead of love.

In his book *Faith After Doubt*, Brian McLaren tells about a time when he was in Africa for a conference when a local journalist approached him and asked him this, “Do you *really* have hope for African Christianity?” He told her that he did, but she shared that she had lost hope. She said, “I have lost hope... Every week, my job as a religion reporter requires me to cover the latest scandals committed in the name of religion. I’ve come to see much of Christianity as a criminal enterprise. Just last month, for example, I covered a pastor who prophesied that there was a woman in his congregation with HIV, and she was praying to be healed, but her prayers could not be answered because there was a curse on her land.’ At the altar call... a woman came forward, crying and trembling, because she felt his description fit her: she had HIV and she owned the land she inherited from her late husband, who had died of AIDS the previous year. ‘The Lord says that your healing will only come if you give your land to the *man of God*,” the preacher said, referring to himself. She gave him the deed to the land. Then, a few months later she died of AIDS.”

Unfortunately, such stories are not that unusual and are not limited to one country or denomination. When we hear about corruption and hate in secular organization, we are not that shocked, but when it is in the Church, we are heartbroken. Some of us even lose faith because of such scandals or when churches teach hate of certain groups of people. Some may even think of the reign of God as something that is limited to the afterlife.

That is why I believe it is important for those of us who walk the path of faith, to remember and focus on the core of what we are about. The teachings and actions of Jesus about the Reign of God are so essential to our identity and mission.

And so today we look at some of the parables Jesus gave about the reign of God as a spiritual reality that is hard for us. In the parables of Jesus, we learn that reign of God reorients/shocks us to what is real and important in life: the presence of God and our connection to God and to all beings. Each of the parables we are highlighting has an element of surprise in it or a twist that makes it clear that the reign of God is not what we normally expect.

Mustard can be considered a weed. One seed quickly produces sufficient plants to overwhelm a field. Mustard grows entirely wild and when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it. So the reality of the reign of God permeates every part of our reality.

The second parable is about yeast. This parable tells us about the pervasive nature of the reign of God. The image of yeast for observant Jews was not always positive as it was seen as a corrupting agent. Yet, in the reign of God, we see God takes what is often negative and transforms it into something life giving like bread to provide nourishment for all.

Then we have the parable of the merchant who sells everything he has in order to get the pearl of great price. This may seem like a neat thing to do if you were a collector, but financially speaking, as a merchant, this kind of practice is unwise. What about prudent financial practices of spreading investments to minimize loss? Would an experienced merchant place one's total wealth in a single investment? So investment in the reign of God may seem foolish to the rest of the world.

These parables make two important claims about the nature of the reign of God: 1. It is pervasive because it is a spiritual reality that is in all of life. 2. It seems like foolishness to the rest of the world because it leads us to live with a vision that we are all one. If the vision of the reign of God does not challenge and upset common perceptions of life, then we are missing the point. If the reign of God does not lead us to greater love and connection, then we are living by the values of the systems of the world.

In his book, *It's Time for a Revolution*, Jake Owensby, says that often times we miss the reign of God because we tend to think that we are center of the universe and not God. Owensby writes, "A world that we seek to control in order to achieve our goals, to secure our status, to protect our privilege, to assert our power, to cling to our stuff, and to consume the objects of our desire is a life hurtling toward destruction. That's what it means to be the center of the universe."

Yet, we do not lose hope because we are a work in progress and the journey of faith is about yielding over and over again to the wisdom of the reign of God and this is not limited to the Church. God's presence is pervasive and defies all of our cultural standards.

Three examples came to me this week about the pervasive nature of the reign of God. One was about sledding by Lydia Dugdale. She wrote, Dear Diary: It was Dec. 16, 2020, and the biggest snowstorm in several years was beginning to blanket New York City. Our daughters were slightly upset because we did not own a sled. My husband set out on foot to remedy the situation, but he soon came back empty-handed. The Upper West Side shops were all out of sleds. Undeterred, my 11-year-old prayed for divine intervention. So late that night, we were in Riverside Park near the Hippo Playground, trying to slide down the hill on flattened Amazon boxes. A family approached us. "Do you girls want to use our toboggan?" the father asked. After making a couple of runs down the hill, my daughters

went to return the sled. “Oh, you can keep it,” the father said. “I brought it here to give away.”

Another story came from Sudan where in a small sleepy town, people are responding with grace and love to the needs of their Ethiopian neighbors who are coming to them as refugees escaping violence and unrest. According to a New York Times article from last Sunday, “Since November, when Ethiopia launched a military offensive in the restive Tigray region, tens of thousands have crossed the Tekeze River into Hamdayet.” The Sudanese people who are welcoming their neighbors are doing it for the love of humanity, even though their refugee neighbors are different from them religiously and culturally. The Sudanese hosts are Muslims while the Ethiopian refugees are Christians. They have taken them into their homes, helped them find work, and provided for their basic human needs.

The third example comes from our local community. Some of you might have seen the Blessing Box that is sitting now in front of St. James Episcopal Church in Batavia. The idea behind it is simple and yet powerful. During this time of pandemic and increased economic suffering in our community, a group of people came together to put this box in the community and to fill it with simple food items, warm hats and mittens, and other simple gifts to meet some basic human needs. No big agenda behind this! Only people sharing their care in the community.

All these examples are reflections of the pervasive nature of the reign of God and how it helps us to live by the wisdom of connection and love. We don’t always live by its wisdom. Yet, we are often captured by its beauty and truth and we return again and again to this vision guided by the power of love which God planted in our hearts.

Lectio Divina from Matthew 6:25-27, 31, 33

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?... Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Amen.