

**8 Pentecost
July 30, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen**

There is a lot in the world that I cannot control ... all I have to do is read the headlines or watch the evening news to be convinced of that. But what is in my control are the choices I make. I can choose to live into the madness of a world that is caught up in winning at all costs ... divisions and bigotry ... anxiety and fear. Or I can choose to do my small part for sanity by affirming my faith at ground level and being a faithful choice-maker. For me, faith isn't about exercising control ... faith is about making choices.

This morning we heard Jesus tell five parables in a row ... a virtual parable "dump" ... the parable of the Mustard Seed, Leaven, Treasure in the Field, Pearl of Great Price, and Good and Bad Fish. Jesus begins each parable with "The kingdom of heaven is like ...". Only the last parable ... the Good and Bad Fish ... gets any explanation. And, as I mentioned last week, I think most of these explanations of the parables are editorial additions made by the authors of the gospel accounts.

Jesus didn't have any control of the environment in which he was born and lived. The people of power in his time had made God small and convenient. The world in which Jesus lived had made scapegoats of foreigners, strangers, women, the marginalized, and nonconformist. So, would Jesus choose to make peace with their bigotry or would Jesus stand for love and justice?

What the bible text tells us is that Jesus chose to "give" in a world of "take." Jesus chose to "love" in a world of "hate." Jesus chose "embrace" in a world of "bigotry and division," "mercy" in a world of "vengeance," and "God" in a world of "self." When those choices offended the righteous, he chose to suffer.

It is obvious that Jesus was a faithful choice-maker ... choosing justice, and mercy, and compassion. But how did he teach that to others? He did that by inviting them to live in the kingdom of heaven ... the kingdom of God ... to live in God's realm. But just what is this kingdom of heaven? ... this kingdom of God? ... this Realm of God? Where is it? When is it? What is it? Maybe a parable or two or three or five will help the people ... then and now ... understand.

So, the question is, "How is a mustard seed like the kingdom of heaven? And just what is this kingdom of heaven? How is a woman kneading yeast into flour like God's realm?

How is a man buying a field to gain a buried treasure like the kingdom of God? How is a merchant spending his entire fortune to buy a single pearl like the realm of God?

As a point of information: In Matthew's gospel Jesus speaks of the "kingdom of heaven" instead of the "kingdom of God." The author of Matthew's gospel is writing for a Jewish audience and therefore avoids using the word "God" so as not to offend his fellow Jews who would not speak or write the name of their deity. Instead, he uses the term "kingdom of heaven," but he is speaking of the same thing as when authors of Mark and Luke speak of the "kingdom of God." Moreover, since "kingdom" is gender specific, many authors today use the "realm of God," or "God's realm" when speaking of the "kingdom of God," or the "kingdom of heaven."

Now, it has been said that the only thing people in churches ever want to talk about is Jesus, but that the only thing Jesus ever wanted to talk about was the kingdom of God. When one reads through the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke it is interesting how focused Jesus is on the realm of God, and how little he says about himself.

So, again, just what is this "realm of God?" ... or, in Matthew's gospel the "kingdom of heaven? What is this realm that Jesus spoke of so often? What is it? Where is it? And when is it? The fact is that there are whole libraries on this subject, namely because Jesus almost always speaks of the realm of God in such oblique ways. Jesus never completely defines the realm of God. Rather, he points to it in parables and aphorisms. "The kingdom of heaven is as if someone spread seed on the ground, ..." The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took ..." The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ..." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Jesus may not have defined the kingdom of God but it is clear that those around him knew enough to be intrigued by the idea. John Dominic Crossan, a prominent Jesus scholar, has said that the realm of God was the way things would be if we were to make God in charge of our world, instead of greed and power. In the time of Jesus that meant specifically the concept of the kingdom of God challenged the authority of the Temple, and the kingdom of God was in direct opposition to the kingdom of Caesar ... the Roman Empire ... and that is what got Jesus killed.

Where is the kingdom of heaven? Right here in this place ... not somewhere else. When is the kingdom of God? Now, not later ... like after we die. The realm of God is right now, here today! What is the realm of God? It is a world where God's justice, love, mercy, and compassion rule, and not military might, and political power, and economic greed.

The late William Sloan Coffin once wrote: "Too many religious people make faith their aim. They think 'the greatest of these' is faith and faith defined as all but infallible doctrine. These are the dogmatic, divisive religious people, more concerned with freezing the doctrine than warming the heart. If faith can be exclusive, love can only be inclusive."

Jesus was preaching about the "kingdom of heaven ... the kingdom of God." In a world obsessed with righteousness, and orthodoxy, and who's on top, and who has the most, it is easy to look around and feel out of control ... then and now. But we have a choice ... we can be faithful choice-makers. We can either give into that world and become part of it, or we can choose to be on the side of God ... and God's realm. Surely, this choice will inconvenience someone ... maybe even those who we are close to ... maybe even ourselves ...especially ourselves. The more I choose love, justice, hope, and compassion, the more I will offend those who find profit and purpose in hatred, privilege and despair. But the fact is that it is a choice ... a choice to live in God's realm ... not the world's realm of abusive power, greed, anxiety, and fear.

So what in your world is out of your control? And what choices are you called to make? All the church wants to do is talk about Jesus, yet all Jesus wanted to talk about was the kingdom of God. It seems to me, if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then living into the God's realm might be a good choice ... even in a world of things we can't control. We can be faithful choice-makers. Remember, God's kingdom ... God's realm ... is here and now ... in this place and not somewhere else, and in this time and not after we are dead. We have a choice ... let's be faithful choice-makers.

Amen.

I have an addendum to this week's, and last week's sermon. Both sermons were about parables, and I mentioned that I believe Jesus told these parables without explanations ... that the explanations we read are editorial additions to the text. Next week we turn to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, so before we leave the parables I thought I'd add this piece.

Well, I think many of you know that the four canonical gospels ... Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John ... are not the only writings about Jesus that we know about. There were many writings about Jesus in the first few centuries after his death and resurrection. The early Church was tasked with deciding which of these writings to include as having authority, and which ones to leave out. Some of those that were not included were supposed to have been destroyed, but some monks in the Egyptian desert decided to hide them rather than destroy them.

In 1945 a group of writings was discovered in the Upper Nile Valley in a place called Nag Hammadi. One of these writings was a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus called the Gospel of Thomas. Now, much of the content of the Gospel of Thomas is also

found in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke ... but not all of it. A number of scholars believe that the Gospel of Thomas predates the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

So I thought I'd read you a portion of the Gospel of Thomas that contains two parables ... one you know, and one that I doubt you have heard before. It will give you something to ponder and discuss at coffee hour.

This is from sayings 96 and 97 of the 114 sayings from the Gospel of Thomas:
(By the way ... you can download a pdf copy of the Gospel of Thomas ... just Google "Gospel of Thomas" and you will find a number of links.)

96: Jesus [said], "The Father's imperial rule is like [a] woman who took a little leaven, [hid] it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread. Anyone here with two ears had better listen!

97: Jesus said,
"The [Father's] imperial rule is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty."

So the question to ponder and discuss: "How is the woman with the empty jar like the "father's imperial rule" ... or the kingdom of heaven and Matthew would say? ... or the kingdom of God as Mark and Luke would have said? ... or the realm of God as some scholars today might say? This should give you something to ponder and discuss at coffee hour.