

**8 Pentecost  
July 26, 2020**

**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.**

So, what is this “kingdom of heaven” that Jesus keeps talking about? Where is it? What is it? When is it?

Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the sower. Last week we heard the parable of the wheat and the weeds. This week we here five more parables ... all one liners.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast kneaded into dough to make bread. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value. The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea that catches all kinds of fish.

Wow ... my head is spinning.

Let me give a little context to this. First of all, Jesus did not invent the parable. It was a teaching device that long preceded him. And, unlike a metaphor, or an analogy, a parable wasn't meant to be definitive. In spite of the author of Matthew's gospel attempt to explain the parable of the sower, and the parable of the wheat and weeds, most scholars doubt that those explanations were originally part of the original story. Parables were told to start a conversation. In the case of the parables of Jesus that conversation would have been about the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

Finally, what about the term, “kingdom of heaven?” In the gospels of Mark and Luke the term is “kingdom of God.” Since Matthew's gospel seems to be directed at a Jewish audience the author uses “heaven” instead of “God” out of sensitivity to the fact that Jews did not say the name of God out loud, or write the name of God. To this day, many Jewish writers refer to God as “G-d.”

In a world where there are few true kingdoms left as political structures, another way to think of “kingdom of heaven,” or “kingdom of God,” is the “realm of the divine.” New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan likes to say, “The realm of the divine is what the world would look like if everyone everywhere would act as if God were in charge ... rather than greed, or power, or one's own personal ego.”

So, what do these parables really tell us about that realm of the divine? Or, how do these parables get us to start a conversation about this realm of the divine? Is this about what happens to us when we die? Is there an actual geographical place in this universe ... or another

universe ... that we go after this life is over? Is this realm of the divine something that will happen in the future?

The answer to some of those questions may be “Yes,” but I don’t think that is what Jesus is talking about, or trying to get people to talk with each other about. I believe that the point of these parables is to let people know that the realm of the divine is right here ... right now ... in this place and time ... if only we will choose to live as if that is true. I believe that Jesus was living in the realm of the divine ... the kingdom of heaven ... even while he lived in a world that was controlled by an oppressive occupying Roman government, and a corrupt religious establishment that wielded power over what people thought was their access to God. If that is true, then these parables are actually subversive speech.

Finally, the author of Matthew’s gospel would make us believe that Jesus sat in a boat and told the crowd gathered on the shore all these parable in one afternoon ... one parable after the other in rapid succession. Maybe Jesus had the crowd break up into small groups, each to discuss a different parable, and report back to the whole group just before they broke for dinner. I don’t think so.

As I have noted before in other sermons, all of the gospels are a compilation of stories that are often shortened to just outlines of the real-time events, and there is a lot written between the lines. My imagination tells me that Jesus did not tell all these parables at once. Maybe he told one to one gathering of local folks on one day of the week, and another parable to another gathering on another day of the week. And, I imagine that Jesus told the same parable to different crowds at different times ... and his disciples heard all of them. Finally, I imagine that each time Jesus told a parable and started a conversation about what the kingdom of heaven was like ... what the divine realm was like ... there were new insights that were explored.

Today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel has five parables ... each a sermon in itself. I’ve chosen to look at one that almost every crowd ... in any time and place ... might be able to relate to. The parable of the yeast kneaded into three measures of flour.

Archeologists tell us that if we know about what ancient people eat ... what they eat and how they eat it ... we can know just about everything in their civilization. Bread is, and has been, a staple in every culture since humankind began settling in communities and farming the land around them.

Bread, and the yeast in the bread which give it breath, has also taken on many symbolic meanings, especially in our Judeo-Christian culture. For example, during the night of the first Passover, when the angel of death took every firstborn of the Egyptians, but “passed over” the houses of the Jews, the Pharaoh’s army drove the Jews out of Egypt. “So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders.” (Exodus 12:33) That is why matzah ... unleavened bread ... is eaten at Passover.

And bread ... as the Body of Christ ... is central to the Christian Holy Communion ... representing the broken body of Jesus. Finally, in the prayer that Jesus taught us, “Our father in heaven ... your kingdom come ... give us our daily bread ... “

Back to the parable, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Obviously this a symbol of transformation. Bread began as wheat growing in the field. It was milled by hand into flour, mixed with water, a little oil, and yeast was added. However, that yeast didn’t come in a little packet at the supermarket. Rather it was like our sourdough ... small bits of dough left over from previous bread making and then added to the next batch of flour. This form of bread making dates back thousands of years, and the sourdough leaven was often handed down over generations. The bread the Jesus refers to was baked on large hot stones, or in clay ovens, and was something like our present day pita bread.

So, the question that the crowd would have been faced with was, “How is this process of making bread with leavening like the kingdom of heaven?” How is adding yeast to flour ... yeast that may have been handed down for generations ... how might this give one access to the divine realm? If the realm of the divine is not in some other place, and/or at another time, what does this parable tell us about how I might live our lives in this holy realm?

Remember, this crowd sitting on the shore saw in Jesus someone who was living in this kingdom of heaven ... in this realm of the divine. That is why they listened to him. They saw him live by the Law of the Torah, yet he seemed to live beyond the Law as well. He not only worshipped in the synagogue on the Sabbath, but he also healed on the Sabbath. He not only broke bread with his disciples and close friends, Jesus included the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. Jesus taught his followers to receive a new identity as citizens of the kingdom of heaven ... this realm of the divine. Jesus is still teaching his followers ... those who take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... about this new identity ... and identity as a citizen in kingdom of heaven ... the realm of the divine. This realm is the society where the love of God is the ruling authority. This realm of the divine is one where we ... as citizens of this realm ... participate with God in drying all tears, healing all wounds, reconciling all enemies, flattening all swords into ploughshares. Jesus’ way to end oppression and injustice and poverty ... and pandemic and systemic racism ... is to let hearts be transformed person by person through the love of God until this world we live in is brimming with citizens of a new realm.

Did the way Jesus live his life have anything to do with the leaven ... the yeast? What is the leaven in our lives? How might we be like yeast in the world around us? Does this have anything to do with the prayer Jesus taught us? “Our father in heaven ... your kingdom come ... give us our daily bread ...”

In just a few minutes we will continue with our service of Holy Communion. If we were all together in this sanctuary we would literally be in “union with” each other in the breaking of the bread. But the events of our world are keeping us apart. However, if the “kingdom of

heaven” ... the realm of the divine ... means anything at all, it means that our togetherness is beyond time and space.

If we were all together in this sacred space, I would be inviting all who are worshipping with us to feel welcome at our table. Sadly, that is not necessary.

In the early Church there were those who were chosen to preside at the table when they remembered the last night that Jesus was with his disciples. That “presider” is what we call a priest. The Church, as it became an institution, gave the sole authority to the priest for consecrating the bread and wine. However, the Church also defines a “sacrament” as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” So, I invite you ... if you feel so moved ... to bring bread and wine ... or another beverage to represent the wine ... to your table. And, during our Spiritual Communion ... after pastor Deena and I have received our communion bread ... you partake of your own bread and wine. Sacrament ... “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”

This morning, instead of the usual communion host wafer that we get from the Shrine’s church supply store, I am going to use pita bread ... something like Jesus might have shared with his disciples. But I want to end with two quick stories.

Babs and Tom Lutton were missionaries for the Episcopal Church for three years in Kenya. One of their ministries while they were there was to bake communion wafers for the churches in the area. I don’t know if Babs and Tom used yeast in the making of those communion wafers. But I do know that they were certainly leavening to the Church in that small corner of God’s vineyard. Our best to Tom and Babs who are now living in Savannah, Georgia. Tom had a heart procedure this week, and he is doing well. We will be praying for him later in the service.

Finally, I used pita bread every week for communion at St. Mark’s in Toledo, Ohio. Every Saturday Caren and I would go to Tiger Bakery to buy the bread, and more often than not, we would see the Muslim bakers in the kitchen on their prayer mats saying their prayers. I loved that this bread, blessed by our Muslim neighbors, was being blessed again to become spiritual food for us on Sunday.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

So, as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, what is the yeast we know in our lives that gives breath to the bread of life ... the realm of the divine ... in the midst of the world today.

What is this “kingdom of heaven” that Jesus keeps talking about? Where is it? What is it? When is it? Start a conversation ... and listen.

Amen.