

GOD'S VISION GROWING Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

The sermons in our church for the past two Sundays have each examined one parable in Matthew 13. These parables addressed ideas about a concept that Jesus called the kingdom of heaven as recorded in the gospel of Matthew. Today's text contains five more parables that try to explain how the kingdom of heaven works. I'm going to tell you a story to get you thinking about how these parables might address our potential questions about God's work in our world.

Zeke van Zanten, in his retirement in a rural town, was enjoying a life that allowed him to be active when he wanted to be and relaxed when that felt right. On this particular morning, everything seemed to be going right. He had awoken, feeling refreshed after a good night's rest. When he arose, his wife greeted him with affectionate warmth. The sky was cloudless and bright blue, and the outside temperature was just about perfect. He took his morning coffee out on the deck and reveled in the possibilities of the day. Zeke was one who was inclined to think that the goodness around him was the result of God's gracious care in the world and he was happy to draw attention to that in conversation with others. His enthusiasm this morning drove him off his deck, coffee in hand, to chat up his neighbour who was surveying his own yard. He felt that the time was right to draw attention to God's goodness in the conversation with his neighbour, so he commented about this glorious day and how God was blessing their life today.

Zeke's neighbour jumped all over that. Sure, the day was fine, but if Zeke was so confident that God was behind the weather on this day and that God was actively affecting their lives' circumstances, then where was God's work evident in the headlines around the world today? Hadn't Zeke looked at the newspaper that morning? In downtown Winnipeg, two houses had burned overnight, and someone had been stabbed outside of the Canada Life Centre after a concert. Down in the U.S., all kinds of Americans were still clamoring for the return of Donald Trump as president even though he had been impeached twice and was facing a variety of criminal charges. Over in eastern Europe, areas of Ukraine were still being ruined and civilians were being killed by a stupid war between Russia and Ukraine. In Phoenix, Arizona, the temperature had been at least 110 degrees Fahrenheit for 27 consecutive days and weather experts were saying that this July would be the

hottest month in human history. Didn't Zeke feel some concern about global warming? Come on, surely Zeke had some questions about the goodness of God's work in this world.

Zeke didn't have much of a response for his neighbour. How was God at work when there was so much horrid stuff happening in the world? It didn't take long for this question to bother Zeke a lot. The day that had started out so well didn't seem quite so perfect anymore. Zeke decided that he needed to ask the pastor at his church for advice about how to think about this issue. He called the church and his pastor said he would be happy to make some time for conversation. So, they talked a bit about God's vision for the world and how we often don't see much evidence of that vision taking hold.

Zeke's pastor talked about the world to which Jesus came and reminded Zeke about how Jesus had said that he had come to bring God's vision to the earth. Jesus came to a land that experienced oppression and domination from the Roman Empire. Jesus came to a land where injustice and economic inequity were common. When Jesus came, things were not good in the world, and they didn't become good while Jesus was on earth. And yet, Jesus could proclaim that the vision of God for the world was being carried out. They looked at some stories that Jesus told that were recorded in Matthew 13 to find some clues about what Jesus meant when he talked about the vision of God on the move in the world of his time and how that might connect to today.

Let's look at some of those parables in Matthew 13 as we imagine the things that Zeke's pastor might have said to Zeke. In all five parables that comprise our text today, Jesus begins with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like." We should talk first about the meaning of the phrase, "kingdom of heaven." The word "kingdom" is foreign to us in some respects because we haven't lived in our country under the control of a king or queen for a long time. The idea of a kingdom likely suggests to us a country ruled and controlled by one person. Much as some people like to suggest that we have that situation in our country, we don't really relate to the idea of a kingdom. When we think of the way that Jesus lived while on the earth as he revealed God to us, we recognize that when Jesus talked about the kingdom, he was not talking about a situation of dominant control. That's not how the kingdom of heaven works. Because the word "heaven" is in the phrase, we might think that Jesus is talking about eternity in heaven. But that can't be. The parables in this chapter are about what happens to people on earth. The word "heaven" in these phrases remind us that what Jesus is talking about comes from God. The kingdom of heaven is the world working the way that God wants it

to work. In the gospel of Luke, the phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” is always rendered as the “kingdom of God.” The kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is humanity living as God desires. Brian McLaren says that “the reconciling movement resonating out from Christ’s life, teaching, death, and resurrection is what we mean by the kingdom of God.” (McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus, p. 71) When we see humans living in harmony with each other and with God, when we see humans loving each other, when we see humans at work to bring peace to troubled places, when we see humans responding to God’s offer of relationship with God, we are seeing the kingdom of heaven. Hopefully, that helps us with understanding the subject that Jesus addresses when he says, “the kingdom of heaven is like.” In my sermon title and introduction, I talked about the vision of God moving forward. I mean the same thing. This is about God’s dream for the world.

Now, how does Jesus describe the kingdom of heaven? In the first parable, Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, a tiny seed that grows to become the largest of garden plants. Evidently, the mustard plant in Palestine was a larger plant than the plant we think of when we think of mustard growing in the field in Manitoba. The seed was small, and it grew into a sizable plant. That’s all there is to the first parable. It seems evident that Jesus is talking about the way that God’s vision or work can begin very small, perhaps almost imperceptibly, and grow into something much larger. We only need to think of how a few followers of Jesus in the first century C.E. became a worldwide body of followers of Jesus in our day to recognize this idea of the kingdom of heaven beginning small and growing large. We might also think about illustrations on a smaller scale, illustrations like followers of Jesus extending mercy and forgiveness to people who have subjected them to acts of violence and the rippling effects of goodness that result. We might think about how small acts of kindness can radiate out and affect more people than the first recipient of that act of kindness. God’s vision of humanity living in the harmony of God can begin in any situation with something small and grow into something much bigger.

In the second parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast. It is something like what happens when someone makes bread, mixes yeast into the dough, and then works the dough so that the yeast is spread throughout the dough. Again, Jesus refers to something small, a little amount of yeast, having a notable impact as it helps the dough to rise and become bigger, and as it helps the resulting bread to have a better taste. This story seems to say that God’s work is often unnoticed but that it’s always going on, spreading into the world and helping the

world be a more attractive and better place. As followers of Jesus help their neighbours, give food to those who don't have enough, visit people in prisons, and act in a variety of kind and gracious ways, God's vision and work grows. I suspect that these two parables have something else in mind, too. Perhaps Jesus contrasts the way that the Roman empire works with the way that God's vision works. Perhaps that is why the word "kingdom" is used to describe God's work. God's work and vision does not spread the way we would normally think of a kingdom as spreading. I use McLaren's words again. "[God's] kingdom advances with neither violence nor bloodshed, with neither hatred nor revenge. It is not just another one of the kingdoms of this world. No, this kingdom advances slowly, quietly, under the surface—like yeast in dough, like a seed in soil. It advances with faith: when people believe it is true, it becomes true. And it advances with reconciling, forgiving love: when people love strangers and enemies, the kingdom gains ground." (McLaren, p. 32)

In the third and fourth parables, Jesus seems to talk about the value of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like someone finding a treasure in a field. The treasure is worth so much that the one who finds the treasure sells everything he has so that he can buy the field in order to own the treasure that he found in the field. Or the kingdom of heaven is like such a fine pearl that a merchant who is looking for pearls sees that fine pearl and sells everything he has so that he can purchase that one pearl. Perhaps we need to add the last semi-parable to this point. In the last verse of our text Jesus says to the disciples, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." D. Mark Davis thinks that Jesus means that the teacher of the law recognizes that the kingdom is so valuable that he throws out other treasures he has in order to focus on the kingdom of heaven. ([Left Behind and Loving It: Five and a Half Parables](#)) If that's correct, then all three stories seem to say the same thing. To understand the vision and work of God in this world and to be a part of it is highly valuable. When it feels like God is absent and so much bad is happening in our world, these stories remind us that we need to look for where God is at work. When our eyes are opened to what God is doing in our lives and in many places around the world, we are so impressed that we recognize that this is worth everything. The love, peace, and reconciliation that is happening because of God's influence are so good that we want to participate in what God is doing. This encourages us to develop a mindset less focused on what we can accumulate for ourselves and more focused on how we can be a blessing to other people. That is

what is in line with the vision of God as revealed in Jesus and is what is truly valuable.

In the fifth parable, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a fishing net that is cast into a lake and pulls up all kinds of fish. Some of the fish are desirable and some aren't. The fishermen collect the good fish and throw out the bad. Jesus says this how it will be at the end of the age when the angels will separate good people from wicked people and the wicked will go into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Let's begin our discussion of this story by noting that it seems to emphasize the same thing as the story about wheat and weeds in last Sunday's parable, that both good and bad coexist in our world and probably within the church. If this is a parallel to that story, then it reminds us of how the vision of God attracts all kinds of people and that it is God's work to sort out the true motives of the people who are caught up in the net of God's vision.

Now, should we also discuss the end of this parable with its fiery furnace and weeping and gnashing of teeth? Some of you may have noted that the same imagery occurred in last week's text and our sermon didn't discuss that imagery. I didn't blame the preacher. Interpreting that imagery seems like a bit of a minefield. Some of us read that and jump to the conclusion that Jesus is talking about a fiery hell where evil people will suffer eternally. It seems to me that such a conclusion is based more on medieval visions of hell than a careful understanding of this text. I'm not ready to claim that I know for certain what Jesus means here, but I am convinced that the fact that this saying occurs in a parable means we have to be careful about understanding the saying literally or concluding that it is an important piece in the meaning of the parable. I understand parables to be highly figurative and intended to convey one main idea. We should also consider the idea that this saying sounds a lot like Jewish apocalyptic. That's a kind of communication that is again highly figurative and includes fantastical elements designed to get people to sit up and take note. Jesus surely wants his listeners to join in the vision of God for the world and uses communication forms that made sense in his time and that would get his listeners to notice the urgency.

How do these reflections on these five parables about the kingdom of heaven speak to our questions about the vision of God in our world today? When we think about Zeke going to his pastor in our introductory story, wondering about the problem of seeing God's work in our world when there is so much bad happening and Zeke's pastor pointing him to these parables, how do they speak to Zeke's problem? I've already suggested some ways that these parables speak to that issue

as we examined them. These parables tell us that the vision and inspiration of God for how people should live in love, peace and harmony with God and each other is worth everything. These parables also remind us that we can't always see the way that God's vision grows and expands. They also remind us, though, to pay attention to the way that human acts of love, kindness and reconciliation demonstrate that God's vision is taking effect. These parables remind us that God's vision will ultimately be the guiding vision for humanity. These parables encourage us to fully invest our lives in living in ways consistent with God's vision, joining in the reconciling, harmonizing and healing way of life that is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, even when we observe how badly things are going on earth, we don't conclude that God's vision is thwarted and that God is uninvolved in the earth. Rather, we focus on where we do see God's good vision inspiring humanity and we hold on to the idea that God's vision will ultimately become the universal vision and we join in with enthusiasm and faith.