

July 30, 2017

Romans 8:26-30

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

The Hidden Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. Jesus says, it's not a Kingdom that's out there and obvious. It's not like a great big Disney castle or a massive cathedral on a hill. You don't get there because of the huge billboards beside the road, advertising it every few miles: Like 'See Ruby Falls, exit 175'. 'See Ruby Falls, 20 minutes ahead'. 'See Ruby Falls. Turn left in 500 ft. You have arrived.' No, the kingdom of God is different. It's hidden, Jesus says. It's secret. It's tucked inside and buried beneath and found by just a few. It's there under everything, waiting, until the right moment when it can be discovered.

The kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. That's Jesus' message today in the parables he tells us. It's his message to us, to his disciples, to his church, that the Kingdom of God is not out there for everyone to see. And it sounds like a strange message, honestly. Since nowadays we are used to everything being out in the open and easy to Google. We don't like things being secret or hidden. And we certainly don't like God being that way. God should be transparent. Faith should

be on display. The kingdom should be as obvious as a million Jesus fish on the back of your car. It should be as visible as churches. And steeples. And signboards advertising this is God's kingdom, right in this building. It's so easy to find God here.

But that's not what Jesus is telling us today. He's telling us the opposite; that the Kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. That it's not easy to find. That it's not this church plus that number of members plus those parking lots. It's not this Bible verse plus that Bible verse plus that sermon. Jesus says God's kingdom isn't like that. It's hidden like a seed, or a bit of yeast, snuck into the midst of things. It's hidden like a treasure or a rare pearl that must be sought and dug up. It's hidden like a net, secretly scooping up the fish for a final catch. The Kingdom of God is not easy to find, according to Jesus. It is mysterious and subtle and often overlooked. But don't worry, Jesus says. Have faith. God's kingdom is still there. It's there among you. Even if you can't see it yet.

The Kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. In our culture, we aren't used to faith being like that. But in Jesus' world, that's the way it was. The Kingdom of God wasn't obvious and in charge. The Kingdom

of Rome was. And Roman statues were everywhere. And Roman soldiers occupied every town. And Roman laws controlled every aspect of life. The Kingdom of Rome was in charge. Not the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom that Jesus promised, where the last were first and the least were the greatest and the fools for love were wiser than anyone else, it was hard to see that Kingdom at all.

But Jesus said the Kingdom of God was at hand. And the disciples were waiting for it to arrive. Just like we are waiting for it too. In all the difficulties of life, we are waiting for God to show up. We are waiting for peace and hope and a place to belong. We are waiting for God to do something with the world. Or with us. Or with our ignorant neighbor or with our wayward child. Or with our society. We are waiting for God's kingdom to arrive. Because the least are still last. And the lost are still left behind. And promises are still broken. And people still live in fear of violence and sickness and hunger. And we wonder: Where is God's Kingdom? And how come it's not here? And why doesn't it just show up already? But no, Jesus says, no, God's kingdom isn't like that. Faith is not about being great, big and obvious. Hope isn't about what

you CAN see, it's about what you CAN'T see. Love is a promised based on what you don't yet know. So the Kingdom is hidden. It's a secret. It is underneath and below and inside and behind everything there is. Have faith, Jesus says. Trust me. Even if you can't see the Kingdom of God yet, it's there.

It's like this, Jesus says. It's like a seed, a tiny seed. Now, a seed is not significant or important in the world. It's not distinguished or noteworthy. It's small. No one notices it or pays any attention to it. It's just a seed. And once you drop it on the ground, forget it. You'll never find it again. And buried it's in a field of dirt, you'll never see it again. It will be lost and forgotten; but once it is buried down there where we can't see, something happens. It starts to grow. And it grows into something new, something wonderful that provides shade and shelter for others. That seed becomes a tree, Jesus says. It creates community and a place to call home. And you wonder where in the world did this tree come from and why in the heck are all these bird nests here?

This summer we took a trip to North Carolina and we stopped in Mt Airy, the home of Andy Griffith. It's the town that inspired Mayberry

and the Andy Griffith show. And the tour guide told us that when Andy Griffith was growing up in Mt Airy, he wanted to take music lessons. But he couldn't afford them. So the minister at the Moravian church (a very old German Protestant denomination), invited Andy to come and learn the guitar for free. For years, he took these free lessons. Andy was so inspired by this free gift, that he decided to go to school to be a Moravian minister himself. But we all know that's not quite where he ended up. He ended up making a TV show about the small things in life. And how they matter. Like how we love our families and our neighbors and even our crotchety enemies. And I wonder if that seed was planted by that Moravian minister who gave free guitar lessons.

Being small is scary. And it makes us feel powerless. Because we are told it's big things that matter. And big people. And big goals like work and money and success. But Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is small. It's in the little things. Insignificant actions as tiny as mustard seeds. Like the kindness and mercy we offer. The space we create for others. The time we take for them. It seems like those little things would just get lost and buried in the vastness of the world. They would just get

lost and buried in people's lives. But that's how it should be, Jesus says. That's what ought to happen. The kingdom needs to be small enough to sift into people's souls and filter into their hearts. Because that's where it will grow. Like yeast mixed into a loaf of bread, it's got to be small enough to permeate everything-- so that everything, all together, will rise. You may not see it. And you may not be aware of it. But have faith that it is happening. Have hope that the Kingdom could be anywhere. It could be everywhere.

The Kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. And the thing about hidden things is that they are, by nature, not easy to find. It takes some work to discover them sometimes. Jesus says, it will take some digging and some searching and some hard work to find it because the Kingdom is like a treasure or a pearl of great price. It won't be right out there in the open. We will have to search for it. And that's what we do here together as a church. We seek the Kingdom. We work together to discover it. Because Jesus didn't just hand it to us, he gave us a map. He gave us the way to get there with all these cryptic clues. He said, take up your cross and follow me. Lay down your lives for one another. Be the

greatest by being a servant. And you'll find the hidden Kingdom. And many of you know that. That the labor of teaching Sunday School with its lesson plans and crafts isn't just about teaching Sunday school. It's seeing God with our kids and through our kids. Attending a Bible study isn't just about blah, blah blah rules, blah blah. It's about you and me sharing God's word in our struggles. And working in the Community Garden isn't just about hoeing and weeding and plowing and sweating. It's about God cultivating our spirits and the joy of meeting our neighbors. Coming to worship isn't just an hour in the pew on Sunday. It's taking a pause to be still with God and to know God with us. Things aren't what they seem. The world isn't what it appears to be. The Kingdom of God is hidden all around us. And it will take some work to dig it up. It will take practice to sift it out. It will take time and a committed effort to learn how to discover the Kingdom. To learn to see God at school. At work. In our homes. In our neighborhoods. If we go a little deeper, we will find it. We will find the Kingdom right underneath, wherever we are in the world.

Like a treasure, the Kingdom is there to be dug up and discovered. Like a seed or a bit of yeast, the Kingdom is buried within us. And like a net, Jesus says, the Kingdom is secretly gathering up its catch. Because in the end, God will gather us all. God will gather up this whole, broken world and sort things out. Everyone will be drawn in to the Creator, like fish drawn in with a net. All kinds of fish will be gathered, Jesus says. Every kind of fish that are like us. And fish that are not like us. Fish that are big and small and old and young. From our part of the lake and OTHER parts of the lake. Fish that we may not think are really fish at all. God will gather them in. And God will sort us out. And how God will do that, well, that's hidden from us.

I confess that I think I can sort people out. I like to think that I know people and I know how they are. And I know what they are up to. I know what they are thinking. I know what God is probably thinking of them. And I know how much better it makes me feel to think that someone is worse than I am. And that I am in and they are out. But Jesus reminds me that in the end, it is God who will sort people out. Because the workings of the world and of people's hearts is hidden from me.



I don't get to sort people out. Because I don't know all the facts. I tend to not know all the circumstances. That person who was a total jerk to me, maybe they have a sick kid. Or that person steps on my toes at work, maybe they have a rotten home life. Or maybe that aloof person is just shy. Or the rich person who seems to have it all is really lonely. Or that 'lazy' person really is depressed. Or the sinner is really actually a saint. And all of that is hidden from me. But not from God. God knows. God searches our hearts, says the apostle Paul. God sees us. God knows us. And God still loves us. Because the God who will judge us is the one who was judged by the world. The one who will draw us all in, is the one who drew all brokenness and sin to himself on the cross. The one who will sort us out in the end, is the one who gave his life in the end for the life of the world, as terrible and as cruel as it was to him. And we don't know why. We don't know how God does it. God just does. God's judgment is a mystery. It is God's job to be God. Not ours.

The Kingdom of God is like something that's hidden. It is small and sneaky like a seed or bit of yeast, infiltrating everything; growing in our midst to shelter us and raise us up. It's like a buried treasure or a rare

pearl, hidden underneath the common things of life. And it will require some effort to discover. It's like a net, invisibly drawing all of us to God. All of us, as broken as we are, as broken as this world is; God will sort things out. Have hope, Jesus says. Have faith. God's kingdom is at hand. Where might it be hidden in your life? How might we ask God to help us discover it?