Heaven in Earth

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/30

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Dearly Beloved, we have in our gospel text this morning five of the classic sayings of Jesus: the mustard seed, the yeast of the loaf, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the harvest of good and bad fish. Most of you have heard many sermons on each one. Gird your loins, because you are about to hear another. I should point out at the beginning, however, the special significance of this particular kind of Jesus-saying. In the last century, some influential theologians and their preacher-students argued that Christianity is to be understood in terms of a great story, a narrative. They demoted God from being the creator of all history and stories and turned God into an actor within the story, fighting against evil, which was sometimes personified as the Devil. Those of you who have followed the “Left Behind” series of books, which seems to provide the metaphoric if not theoretical substance for much contemporary conservative Christianity, might think that the witness of Christianity is a story, the story of God redeeming the world from evil forces. The New Testament does have passages that present such a narrative, particularly in some of the writings of Paul and in the Book of Revelation. The greater part of the New Testament gospels, however, is not about a story like this at all. Rather, it is about our proper relation to God who holds us under judgment. We are right now in the kingdom of heaven whether we know it or not. Most of Jesus’ own teachings, as in our texts today, and in the Sermon on the Mount earlier in Matthew’s gospel, and the Farewell Discourses in John’s gospels, and in the parables and admonitions throughout all the gospels, are about our proper relation to God now before whom we stand under judgment, not about a cosmic war between God and Satan. Whereas the cosmic drama can be called “Christian Narrative,” Jesus’ kind of teachings, and that of other books in the New Testament, can be called “Christian Wisdom.” In our time, many conservative Christians take the narrative to be the primary form of Christian understanding, with the wisdom passages interpreted as support for the narrative. Many liberal Christians take the Wisdom teachings to be primary, and the narratives as symbolic or metaphorical language to intensify the points of wisdom about our relation to God.

Our texts this morning about the kingdom of heaven fall under three sorts of wisdom teaching. The first two make the point that from very small and insignificant things can come very large and spiritually important results. The seed of the mustard plant is tiny. Yet it grows into a shrub that both is large and shelters other beings. This is to say, from a tiny, insignificant beginning, a great charity can come. Those of you who think you have nothing significant to contribute to the work of Christ in the world, don’t worry. You do not know what great things might come from your small gifts. We should note from this passage that small gifts in the kingdom of heaven are recognized by how they provide for others. How many of our sisters and brothers in Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Latin America would welcome nothing fancier than a secure place to make their nests!

The second saying, that a woman’s bread-yeast leavens the whole loaf, makes the point that some Christian virtues need not be imposed from on high. When insinuated subtly, like yeast, they can spread throughout the whole community and transform everything. Yet they are
not seen themselves. Who thinks about the yeast in bread, if you haven’t made the loaf yourself? Jesus, of course, was not thinking about the Christian community when he thought of the loaf, because there wasn’t any such thing in his time. He was thinking rather about his whole society, and the yeast was the gospel and witness of his small band of disciples. Speak the truth in small places, and it might well spread throughout the whole. What a hopeful message! May we have the humility to understand our gospel lives on small terms, and yet have the courage to knead them into the entire loaf of our society!

The second sort of wisdom teaching in our gospel this morning is about the unique and overwhelming value of the gospel that we hear. You stumble on some great treasure in a field, and then quickly go to buy the field to gain ownership of the treasure. Jesus’ point is clear: when you discover a great treasure, you should mortgage your future to acquire it. The gospel message is that you need to be willing to sacrifice a lot or all of your previous investments when you discover the treasure of the gospel: the gospel will bring you into God’s presence. Your retirement fund brings only pre-mortem security.

The story of the pearl of great price makes much the same point, but with a significant existential distinction. Here you are, the pearl merchant, or spiritual seeker, hunting out some kind of heavenly bargain. Let’s be plain about what it means to be a spiritual seeker, rather than a committed practitioner. A seeker is one who has rejected all the options encountered so far. So the seeker’s mentality juggles two passions. One is the negative passion of rejecting the religious culture of birth, and also all those alternative cultures offered as possibilities. The other is the hopeful passion that keeps one moving, always looking, experimenting, risking ridicule and humiliation because of unanswered religious questions.

Suddenly you come upon a religious way of life, like the others as one pearl is like other pearls, but vastly more compelling and beautiful. At this point, you sacrifice all your other commitments and bring to the pursuit of this pearl of great price everything that you have so far invested in other spiritual paths. Jesus had a profound point here. Spiritual commitment is not divided democratically among lots of possibilities. You need one particular path. You might be able to synthesize one traditional path with other paths, but the synthesis has to add up one singular path to which you can give your whole devotion. Jesus’ gospel, he was saying, is that path.

These last two sayings of Jesus make the point that religious life is ultimate. We have many important and legitimate concerns in life—making a living, helping our family, serving the nation, perhaps making a contribution to society and culture that moves beyond our immediate contacts. The religious dimension of life, however, means that in and amongst all of these concerns there is a call to an ultimate concern, something before which we would sacrifice everything else. Hopefully we will not be called upon to sacrifice our other duties and interests. Hopefully we can find the ultimate within each of them. But when push comes to shove, sell everything else and buy the pearl of great price or the field with the treasure of heaven.

The first two sayings of Jesus, about the mustard seed and the yeast, declare that we can do great things out of proportion to our powers. The second two sayings declare that this is possible only if we subordinate, perhaps to the degree of sacrifice, our other concerns to focus on
the heavenly treasure and pearl. The fifth saying, that fishing nets are indiscriminate about what they haul in and that fishermen have to separate the good fish from the bad, is more complicated. This passage has lent itself to the belief of some of our conservative Christian sisters and brothers that there will come a final showdown, an Armageddon, in which God’s forces of righteousness will battle it out with the forces of evil, and finally prevail. But all the passage actually says is that there is a real difference between good and evil and that this distinction will be recognized in each individual case. Each of us, sinner, schlub, seeker, sage, or saint, revealed nakedly as who we are, stands in judgment before God. Neither fudging nor excuses is allowed when we stand in ultimate judgment. Moreover, that ultimate judgment is not some distant moment when we die and show up on St. Peter’s <UltimateGoogle@Valhalla.Org>. Rather we stand under judgment every moment of our lives, and because the Hound of Heaven has our scent, we should always be prepared to give an account.

Fortunately, the gospel of Jesus Christ promises mercy and forgiveness to all who confess their sins. We do not have to wait for a judgment on history to know that we stand before God now. We do not have to wait upon some mythic cosmic drama in the distant future, or perhaps a rapture next week, to acknowledge our ultimate relation to God. Our eternal identity within the eternal life of God is the matter of utmost urgency to us now and at every moment. Theologically speaking, it would be a religious subterfuge to say that our ultimate identity in God’s perspective depends on whether God wins some historical battle with Satan and evil. That ploy is a device for escaping responsibility and displacing it on God, as if God were a character role in a drama about the victory of good or evil over one another.

The surprising thing about all these Jesus-saying is that the kingdom of heaven is never represented as a hereafter in some transcendent sense. Rather, the kingdom of heaven is something we should look for in our daily lives, says Jesus. Like great plants growing from bitty leaves, or a smidge of leaven making a whole loaf rise. Like suddenly finding a great treasure in our workplace, or a pearl of great price among the things we deal with daily. Like suddenly recognizing that, though we fly with turkeys, we shall be judged as to whether we soar like eagles. Other places in the Bible refer to heaven as a transcendent hereafter. I’m sure you have many different images of a heavenly afterlife. But in our gospel text for today, there is none of that afterlife transcendence business. All of these sayings of Jesus refer to the kingdom of heaven at hand, in the daily affairs of Earth, not in the bye and bye. How do they help us understand our situation to be in heaven in Earth? I believe three important lessons can be drawn.

First, because we live in God’s kingdom, even if we miss the point and believe we are only in our own kingdoms, there are real differences between right and wrong, like good fish versus bad fish. To be sure, sometimes affairs are too complicated to be understood clearly, and sometimes there is real moral ambiguity in the sense that what helps also hurts. Nevertheless, for Jesus there are profound and plain values that distinguish right from wrong. These are summed up as love, and are made specific in the public sphere in terms of justice, peacemaking, humility, care for the poor, and so forth. You know the list. In more private spheres love means kindness, forgiveness, non-judgmentalism, acceptance of people different from ourselves, and you know that list too. When our politicians sacrifice justice to greed, peacemaking to belligerence, humility to bullying, and care for the poor to tax breaks for the rich, we know the net contains
bad fish. When our social culture sacrifices kindness to indifference, forgiveness to retribution, non-judgmentalism to contempt, and inclusiveness to chauvinism, we know the net contains more bad fish. Jesus says we need to behave like the good fish.

The tragedy for contemporary Christianity is that so many Christians who believe in the story of God fighting the Devil think that they can be good fish just by taking on the name of God or identifying themselves by the name of Jesus Christ. They think that, if they are on God’s side, then God must be on their side. But that self-righteousness so often leads them to act like the bad fish: they fool themselves into believing that the greed of our economy has God’s favor, they claim that their war-making is righteous because God is at war with the Devil, they think that arrogance toward others is justified because they are the spokesmen of Jesus, they dismiss those who suffer on grounds that they must deserve it, and they believe that they deserve to be richer themselves. Because they think God is at war and they are on God’s side, they believe that their own wars are God’s battles. That belief corrupts Jesus’ values of love, justice, peacemaking, humility, charity, kindness, forgiveness, non-judgmentalism, and inclusiveness of love. Jesus said to love our enemies, not fight them. The true Christian theology is that the unapocalyptic wild creator God loves even the forces of evil, and redeems them. The little apocalyptic God who wars against the Devil and unbelievers is a holdover of ancient paganism, and has entertainment value only for those whom Jesus would regard as the bad fish.

How do we behave like good fish instead? Here is the second lesson from the gospel sayings. To live with the values of the Christian gospel is likely to require sacrifice, discipline, and the focusing of our many interests on what needs to be done to live the life of the gospel. All of creation is good, we Christians say, and our lives are lived in many dimensions, with many purposes. Nevertheless, we need to put first things first in order to love properly and teach others to love as well. Christian discipline does not mean getting rid of all the dimensions and interests of life save one: it means ordering them all so that they add up to a life and community of love. Learning such discipline is a life-long task for spiritual development, and it requires both individual and community effort. Moreover, it sometimes requires sacrifice, like selling prized possessions to buy the field of treasure or the pearl of great price. Think of the sacrifice Jesus made in order to be true to the priorities of love and redemption of enemies.

The third lesson from our collection of Jesus’ sayings is that our small efforts at the disciplined living of the way of love can have enormous consequences. Like the great bush that grows from a tiny mustard seed, sheltering many birds, our small loving endeavors of justice, peacemaking, humility, care for the poor, kindness, forgiveness, non-judgmentalism, and acceptance of people different from ourselves, can make a difference worthy of the kingdom of heaven far beyond what we see. Like a little leaven in the loaf, we can raise our whole society with the multiplier effects of love. We do not need to enlist anyone else in an army to fight God’s battles as we see them. We need to model for them, and lead them into, the ways of love that have the power to redeem the worst.

The kingdom of heaven is where we live now, and our citizenship consists in being called to the disciplines of advancing love in justice, peacemaking, forgiveness, kindness, redemption and all the rest we know so well. Jesus’ point is that, because this is heaven’s kingdom, our small acts of faith have ultimate significance. Let us rejoice in our hope. Amen.
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7/23/05