Small Beginnings, Great Things—Mt 13:31-33, 44-52

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew is a parable chapter. Jesus tells other parables in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. One thing to remember about chapter thirteen is that it is filled with parables. Immediately after Jesus tells these parables in chapter thirteen, he is rejected and John the Baptist is killed. These two separate but very much related events are reminders for us that the world and the powers in this world are set against God’s message and God’s messengers. Any resistance we meet, from wherever it comes, should never come as a surprise to us.

Now, that’s not to say that the world and the powers of this world have no use for religion. Religion of one sort or another has always been a very handy tool for the powers of this world: they have always sought to make religion, faith, a tool of the state, the empire, the prevailing political ideology. Part of what Jesus is telling us in today’s parables is that the powers of this world have no power in or over the kingdom. That is good news indeed for those of us who yearn to make our homes, to find our lives, in the kingdom.

The last parable that Jesus tells us this morning, the separation of the fish, reminds us of the parable of the weeds and the wheat that we heard last Sunday. This is not only a parable of the kingdom, but also a parable of the day of judgment. We don’t talk about the day of judgment much: I guess we don’t want to scare people, maybe,

or perhaps judgment just sounds too judgmental these days. Nobody wants to be judgmental. We are told over and over that Christianity is supposed to be all about love—and it is! And it isn’t only about love. Christianity is about more than love, or, put differently, Christianity is about love from God’s perspective, divine love, not love from our frustrated, bent human perspective. Humans are good at misunderstanding love, twisting love this way and that, subjecting love to conditions, and reshaping love from God’s divine, pristine, and completely beautiful gift into a tortured, distorted, diseased lump of ugliness.

God’s love and God’s justice are inseparable. Love judges, and justice loves. There will be a judgment. That is just as much a part of our faith, just as central to our faith, as Jesus himself. If there will be no judgment, then there is no point to Christ’s call to repent. We are to repent, to turn from the sin that seduces and sickens us and return to God who delights and heals us before it is too late. The final judgment will come in God’s own time. The judgment begins for each of us at death. We only have so much time to heed the Word. Those who do not heed the Word in this life, those who will not, who see no reason to, who think it’s just nonsense and insanity—all this talk of sin and repentance and judgment—these will discover to their horror and shock that it is too late. The time to come to Christ is in this life, this world.

Even at the point of death it is not too late, as the thief crucified with Christ discovered to his unspeakable joy and peace in the midst of his death agony.

Jesus reminds us in the parable of the fish and the net, as with the parable of the weeds and the wheat, as in many other places in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, that there will be a judgment, that God’s love and God’s justice are inseparable. Justice loves and love judges.

All the parables, I am bold to say, speak both of God’s love and God’s justice, which are not like the love and the justice the world practices and pursues. What is like this love and this justice? To what can I compare it?

Microsoft began in a garage. Facebook started with anywhere from one to four guys and one computer. McDonald’s began with one restaurant. Big things sometimes have very small, insignificant beginnings. The Church began with one man with a message; we know that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph, was a man and more than a man, but millions now, as then, still only regard him as a man, an extraordinary man, granted, but still a man only. This congregation began with twenty-two members, no pastor, and no church building. Scripture shows us time and again that God chooses the lowly and humble for His purposes, for His special work among people. Jesus does no less in calling the apostles; he does no less in calling each of us. Big things have small beginnings. This is what God’s love and God’s justice look like. We are who God’s love and God’s justice look like.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (13:31-32). Now, you here know more about seeds than many. Your livelihood depends upon seeds, good seeds, knowing seeds. Many seeds are large, comparatively: the seeds inside the pits of peaches and apricots can be large seeds. A walnut or an almond is a large seed. An avocado has a very large seed, as does a mango. Oranges and apples have medium-sized seeds. Some vegetables have relatively small seeds: carrots and spinach, for example. The mustard seed, as Jesus tells us, and as you may know from your own experience, is quite small. To see what grows from the seed easily leads to incredulity, disbelief: what, *that* little seed becomes *that*? No way!

God’s ways are not our ways, beloved, thank God! Now Jesus is telling us that the kingdom is the same way, and the Church, as part of the kingdom, is the same way. Other than Jesus, who could have foretold that twelve men in Judea would have, could have taken a message with them that took root and grew and grew, so that Christianity is today, still, the predominant religion upon earth? The message had to be planted in each heart; faith had to grow there, slowly or quickly, with difficulty or easily. We may think that a vigorous, fruitful faith grows quickly and easily, but it isn’t always so. Sometimes, the hardiest, most resilient, most abundant faith has grown slowly, and with difficulty, over many years. Praise God for the growth! Praise God for the fruit of that faith!

Comparatively, the mustard plant may not seem like much, but Jesus shares with us something very important: lowly and humble as it is, though it is, it provides shelter for the birds of the air. The kingdom, faith, the Church, provides a place for nurture, a place of safety, shade from the searing sun of life. Consider, brothers and sisters, how many over the centuries have been served through the Church and saved through the Church, including here over this congregation’s life up to this point. Have you never found rest here? nurture? safety? the sense of peace that comes from rest, nurture, and safety?

I’ll tell you, in the world’s eyes, this congregation is not much, and there are many even in our own community who don’t give us a single thought even once a year, yet consider how many lives we are touching through our children’s lunches this summer, through our ongoing fourth Monday meals, through our presence at the Fall Festival, through all the many other ways we serve, all together and individually. We are a humble congregation, sisters and brothers: all we have to boast of is Christ Jesus.

Jesus delights in everyday parables. “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” (13:33). The Greek that St. Matthew uses doesn’t say “mixed in,” but “hid in” the flour. One way or another, the yeast gets into the flour. I think that word hid keeps our attention focused on the secret of the kingdom. The world and the authorities and powers of this world are constantly wondering at the kingdom, at the faith, wondering how it continues to spread, how it continues to take root and grow and rise—they’d like to figure it out! But they cannot figure out the Spirit. The Spirit works all the time in ways the world cannot see, cannot intercept, cannot counter, cannot uproot.

The kingdom, the Church, Christianity, is like this: it takes what was inactive—flour—and mixes into it an active ingredient—faith, Spirit—that activates the whole. Many of us, perhaps have seen bread bake, have seen the dough go into the oven and seen and smelled the browned, fragrant loaf come out of the oven. A well-leavened dough will rise, but it’s hard to say just how much. I’ve baked loaves that have turned out compact, and I’ve baked loaves that increase beyond all my expectations: whoa! The yeast does not take on the character of the flour: inert, dry, no cohesion. The flour takes on the character of the yeast: growing, increasing, mixed together. It only takes a little yeast to leaven a lot of flour. The yeast is that powerful; it has that much transformative power.

Consider how many can be fed with only a little quantity of yeast. The kingdom is like the yeast. Faith is the yeast. That yeast is at work in you, at work in us, at work in the Church, despite all the trials and tribulations, all the hurtful, God-dishonoring things members of the Church—fellow Christians—claim, believe, desire, and do, every day, every year. You, also, are the yeast. Think of all the lives you have leavened: the lives of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, the wider circles of your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, even fellow Christians who needed a little extra help from you. We may well be apt to say, oh, I haven’t had an impact on anybody! I haven’t made a difference. I’m not that important! But you are important to God. You are important to Jesus. You are important to the Holy Spirit. You are just as important to God as seed and yeast are important to us. These things are not dramatic. These things are not impressive—in the sense the world understands, anyway! But oh, what a difference they make in this life! And oh, what a difference you make—were created to make, were chosen to make, are called to make, are enabled and empowered to make—in this life!

God takes the humblest things—seeds, flour, us—and gives them His blessing—Christ in Word and Spirit—and the result is God’s love and God’s justice at work, growing, spreading, increasing, bountiful, peaceable, holy, hopeful, humble, joyful, lowly, loving, loved.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.