

Texts: Matthew 13: 24-43

Subject: Parables of the Kingdom

Theme: Did You Hear That?

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany; February 17, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

From a young age we're surrounded by stories. We might hear the stories of our family history passed down over the table, at the holidays, or other family gatherings. We hear the stories of our national history in school, sometimes finding out there is more to those stories than we were taught. We share stories of adventure, love, discovery, and wisdom. Sometimes, there's a lesson, sometimes just entertainment. My daughter Lily loves to read. She reads the Cupcake Diaries, books from Beverly Cleary, the Secret Garden, and Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Issac is also a fan of the wimpy kid books, and Minecraft stories. I read to the little kids too. Some favorites are, "How do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?" "Amelia Bedelia" and anything from Doctor Seuss. Jacob loves to have a Bible story before bed. (Maybe because he knows he'll get to stay awake for a few more minutes.) Stories bring us together and they require us to quiet down, to listen, to hear what is happening, and to direct our attention to the reader or story teller. They require us to create the picture in our mind, and 'see' the events of the story for ourselves, they stoke our creativity, and engage our minds and feelings.

So it's no wonder Jesus spoke in parables - they got attention. He told stories that make a point, teach a lesson, and reveal something new to the hearers. The people he spoke to were used to this method of teaching - they were people of the story, after all. For generations, Israel had gathered to hear the word of God, in homes and in the

wilderness, at the table, they recounted the stories of God's deliverance, the prophecies and promises, and events and histories that make meaning in life.

The stories we hear Jesus telling in this chapter of Matthew's version of the good news might be a little confusing. The people Jesus was speaking with were more likely fisherman, after all. Would they understand about the wheat harvest? Sowing seeds? Yeast? They ate unleavened bread at the holidays. They knew about mustard, it grew along the shore at the Sea of Galilee - but is it a tree? It was an invasive species that if left unchecked, could take over a whole garden.

These stories might have been familiar to the audience, but the way Jesus tells them might have caused them to hear something different. He turns some of the imagery in a way that it tells something new about the Kingdom of God, presents new insights for those who listen closely, and maybe causes confusion for others. The stories draw us in to hear the Word, and may leave us struggling to understand Jesus, wrestling with the text to find meaning, to see ourselves in the story and to make sense of it all.

Many Bible scholars conclude that any explanation given for parables was a later addition by the early church, and likely just one interpretation of Jesus' teaching.

The same story can cause us to hear different things.

Just before this reading, Jesus tells the parable of a sower - some seed falls on a path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, others fall into good soil. Seemingly this all happens by chance, maybe the sower is not really paying attention, maybe that's just how it goes. Then Jesus tells these parables of the Kingdom. In the first one, an enemy sows weeds among the good wheat. It's easy to interpret this as the "good"

wheat that must be separated from the “bad” weeds. See, the weeds were *darnel*, a plant that in its early stages looked too similar to the wheat to be separated out. Once it is grown it may be easier to see - but by then the roots are intertwined with the wheat and the good would be destroyed with the bad. It is difficult to tell one from the other. They both must grow together. Thinking back to the sermon on the mount, we remember Jesus’ words about judging one another. Faithful disciples grow together along side ones who will not hear Jesus’ Word of faith and promise. We grow in close proximity, and it’s hard to tell us apart, too. The promise of Jesus is that the righteous one will judge which is which. *Did you hear that?*

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus says the mustard seed grows into the tallest of trees, or the greatest of herbs, or shrubs, and becomes a tree in which birds make their homes. This might make someone cry out “fake news, Jesus!” The Cedar tree was a symbol of power and empire. The mustard plant was a big bush. Useful, but also troublesome. (Just like some of us.) *Did you hear that?* Maybe we learned that something small like a seed can become something big; a little faith, or trust goes a long way. One of my favorite authors, Robert Farrar Capon writes that the mustard seed “must end it’s career as a seed” to become something else.¹ The word here for tree is actually translated “lumber” or “wood” - the same word for that tree that Jesus knew - we use the word cross. Jesus hung on the tree for us, that we might die to ourselves and be made new in Him. *Did you hear that?*

Yeast or “leaven” seems easy to understand. It’s essential for making bread rise. People gotta eat. Later we’ll hear Jesus tell the people that the corrupting teaching of the religious leaders of their time is ‘leaven.’ And during passover the bread doesn’t get

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Grace*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, p. 108

yeast anyway. The yeast gets hidden in ‘three measures of flour’ and become the bread, which might be understood as the divine presence. Remember the story: Sarah bakes for heavenly visitors (Gen. 18:6), Gideon prepares bread for an angel of the Lord (Judges 6:19) , and Hannah offers bread when she presents her son Samuel in the temple (1 Sam 1:24). Jesus is the kingdom come near to the people of God - he’s right there with them!

Wheat and weeds, trees and birds, yeast and flour. It’s a lot to handle. It takes time, context, understanding. In our eagerness to know Jesus more, we try to think we have decoded the message, when the bottom line is that *Jesus is teaching them to listen. Teaching them to trust. Teaching them to follow and watch with him.* We wrestle with these stories and try to make sense out of them. We get confused, and either assign one meaning or another to the story, or move on to something we can more easily understand.

It’s tempting to claim we know it all. We want to have the answers, to be the sage on the stage and tell everyone what it’s all about. But it doesn’t work that way. We live in the mystery, and with the context of the cross can understand that Jesus is calling us to faithfully listen and trust, to hear the promise of abundant life and to bring our questions and doubts to the foot of the cross with our failures and selfishness. We don’t have to know it all. We don’t have to always be right.

Jesus has healed and taught, spoken and grown in relationships. He has called followers from fishing boats and tax booths, demonstrated His power over the sea, cast out demons, given sight to the blind. Jesus is going to the cross to take on death and

the sin of the world. He tells his followers to listen to Him, to see who He really is, and to know the kingdom is with them.

Called together through the Word, we are made into the body of Christ - we are the church - and part of our reason for gathering is to come to hear the story of God, to engage in ongoing reflection, to voice the questions we have in prayer and to study scripture together. We bring our own personal stories too, and make meaning together.

God is speaking to us, God is engaging our memories, our minds, and our hearts, gifting us with knowledge, curiosity, discernment, and ears to hear. God with us, Immanuel, is risen and walking with us through our questions and bringing comfort through the Holy Spirit, opening our eyes to see Him, our minds to know Him, our hearts to feel His love, and our ears to hear the story of our Savior. *Did you hear that?* The Kingdom of heaven is like an old church, where the roof leaks, and the toilets get clogged, but people get fed, and children learn the story of faith. Where neighbors hungry and fed, wealthy and poor, healthy and sick, young and old grow together to know they are beloved.

Amen.