

*"Do You Get It?"*  
by Mary Anne Biggs

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 30, 2017

Romans 8:26-39 ~ Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Our gospel reading today contains several short parables. Of course, we all define "short" in different ways. It's a word that I have heard several times over this past week as people told me about the excellent sermons they heard in my absence from Mark, Dale and Ann. Everyone I spoke with gave them rave reviews for both content and brevity. Well, as you know, the old wind bag is back ... so settle in.

Each one of these parables in Matthew is different. Yet each refers to the same reality ... the dominion of heaven ... the realm of God's rule. With the two longer parables, the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel also gathers five shorter parables on the dominion of heaven. They are brief and to the point. They are brush strokes ... snapshots ... vivid images which come together like an impressionist painting to give us the bigger picture. When we stand back a bit ... see them as a whole ... we get a good idea of what God's realm *is* like ... what it *ought* to be like ... what it *will* be like when God gets done with us.

And one of those brush strokes is the parable of the mustard seed.  
Hear the word of God from the 13th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

*(Jesus) put before them another parable: "The dominion 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." - Matthew 13:31-32*

I must admit that for much of my life, I've fallen prey to the temptation to read this parable as something like a proverb ... "big things sometimes have small beginnings" or "don't judge something based on its size." That makes sense on a superficial level ... it talks about something small ... a mustard seed ... blossoming into something much grander. Until you realize; however, that the mustard seed wasn't viewed positively in Jesus' world. Mustard was a weed ... dreaded by farmers the way today's gardeners dread kudzu or crabgrass. It starts out small, but before long it has taken over your field.

Why, then, compare the kingdom of God to a pernicious weed? Because mustard seed has this way of spreading beyond anything you'd imagined, infiltrating a system and taking over a host. Might God's kingdom be like that ... far more potent than we'd imagined ... and ready to spread to every corner of our lives? How might we regard routine invitations to read the Bible, pray, and come to Sunday worship if we thought these things might lead to our lives being infiltrated ... changed ... and taken over by God's reality and rule?

Wouldn't that mean that we can always have hope? Wouldn't that mean that there is no situation so dark ... so difficult ... so impossible that God can't break through. With God all things are

possible. If we can dream it ... we can do it ... if it is also God's dream. No matter how small ... no matter how fragile it may seem sometimes ... the dominion of heaven is growing within us ... growing among us by the power of the Spirit.

Look at this church. The seed was planted and a church was born ... a building ... the body of Christ ... growing in numbers ... growing in vision. This year we will be 130 years old! 130 years old! How many people have enjoyed the shade and shelter of these branches? How many have been nurtured, fed, encouraged, renewed, sustained, and saved because nine charter members had the seed of an idea of what God might do? Makes you wonder, doesn't it, what might happen as the new seeds that God is planting among us now begin to grow?

*The gospel continues.*

*(Jesus said,) "The dominion of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." - Matthew 13:44-46*

Are these two parables making the same point or two different points about the dominion of heaven? Are they about sensitivity and sensibility? Are they suggesting the dominion of heaven is already here among us, but buried, hidden, invisible, so that we still need to "discover" it? Are they saying that only the spiritual seekers find it ... that only the spiritually sensitive perceive it? Are they saying that we never know when it may appear ... where God might be disclosed to us, through whom God might come and speak to us? "Some have entertained angels unawares," claims the author of Hebrews.

Or maybe, these images are about sacrifice and singularity ... about choices and consequences. Maybe they're saying that we can't have it both ways ... that we won't get the treasure unless we've bought the farm for Jesus ... that we can't have the pearl of great price and hold on to all those lesser pearls at the same time. Maybe they're saying that the one thing worth having in all the world costs us everything else in the world. Jesus said if, "You want to get a life, you've got to give your life." It's baptism ... it's dying and rising with Christ... it's deciding, "I've been an ostrich long enough ... I'm going to soar with the eagles now." It's denying yourself ... taking up your cross ... and following him. Is that what these parables mean?

Or maybe the point is value and worth ... the joy of being rich beyond your dreams with the only wealth that lasts. It doesn't seem like a sacrifice to this fellow who trades in his fortune to get a greater treasure. The seeker of fine pearls doesn't hesitate to surrender all the other gems in the collection. He thinks it's worth it. But more to the point, do you think that the dominion of heaven might just be worth everything to gain?

*The gospel continues.*

*"Again, the dominion of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." - Matthew 13:47-50*

The more I thought about this fish story and its wider message, I realized that it is filled with both Good News and Bad News. The Good News is that we are all children of God ... and the Bad News is that we are all children of God.

The Dominion of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. We who have found ourselves caught in God's dragnet ... we, who have been brought together here at 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational UCC in Eagle River ... we are fish of all shapes, sizes, colors, classes. We are Yankees, Southerners, left handed, right handed, bald, braided, permed and pressed. We are democrats, republican, independents, young, and young at heart. We are teachers and students. We are workers who wear both blue and white collars. We are stay-at-home moms, stay-at-home dads, retirees and those who wish they could retire. We are grandparents, singles, married, divorced, clergy, laity, those employed, those seeking employment. We are those struggling with all kinds of addictions and losses. We are those that can sing and those that can't carry a tune if it was strapped to our backs ... that would be me. You get the picture ... we are a hodge-podge of sea creatures caught in the net of God's love ... brought together by a power greater than ourselves for the good of something that is greater than ourselves. We are fish of every kind. Or as I have described our church to those who ask the question about what kind of people attend here ... we've got a lot of different chips in this cookie.

This is a great gift but it is also hard at times to live out. Hard because it requires us to do more than just give lip service to being inclusive and diverse. The net is large and wide and continues to gather what comes in its way. It's not yet time for it to be hauled to shore and for the separation to take place. And I'm not worried about that inevitable sorting because as Frederick Buechner says, " When that day comes and God rings down the final curtain, the judge will be Christ ... the one will judge us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully."

We need to continue to live out the Gospel. It's just not enough to say that we are inclusive ... we need to continue to find ways to welcome all our brothers and sisters as equals at the table. It's not enough to say that we welcome the stranger ... we need to continue to show in our actions that this is the church of the open door. It's not enough to just say that we are a mission minded church ... it means continuing to figure out the concrete ways to minister with those in our community who are homeless and hungry. For others who have just joined the journey, we have to retell the story so that they can understand and have an appreciation for our historic past and find their own place at the table to contribute to the next chapter of this unfolding story.

The gospel continues.

*"Have you understood all this?" (Jesus asked them). They answered, "Yes." - Matthew 13:51*

"Do you get it?" Jesus asks the disciples. Do you get it? The church is a field where God's good seed is spread liberally, and some of it is wasted but most of it produces a rich harvest. The church is a field where weeds and wheat are growing side by side. It's hard to tell the difference, but it will be separated out and brought into the barn one day. The church is a people who are always growing ... always hoping ... who know that there are no small matters and no small people in God's eyes because God makes what is tiny grow into something, or someone, great. The church is a field where people discover buried treasure. The church is the jewelry store where people find the one gem worth having above all others. The church is a sea full of strange and wonderful fish, some good and some not so good, but all diverse and beautiful. It is the

place where we rejoice that God loves us ... and we struggle to love the other people God loves ... because God loves the people we don't even like.

The church is both now and not yet. The church is active in the midst of us ... and waiting for us just ahead. The church is hard work in the field and the grace which brings growth without effort. The church is the death and resurrection of people... planting, tending, harvesting, rejoicing. The church is the place of grace ... the people of patience ... waiting ... trusting ... forgiving ... loving ... remaining. The church is a people waiting gladly for God's last day because everything unworthy and unhealthy will be removed and only love and life and joy will remain before God. That place is the dominion of God. Those people are God's church.

Are we that place? Are we those people? Is this the dominion of God? Still in process ... small as a seed ... buried and hidden ... mixed up with all kinds of unworthy stuff ... but still, right here, the church of Jesus, the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Eagle River?

I believe that we are! Thanks be to God! May we pray?

Lord, day by day, bit by bit, one by one, more and more ... continue to make us your place ... and make us your people, in the name of Jesus. Amen.