

A perfect world

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John 's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on Sunday, July 27, 2008, the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost.

The kingdom of heaven is like

Matthew 13:31

Jesus spends much of his ministry teaching us about the kingdom of heaven, a prototype of what we would call a perfect world. The kingdom or realm of God is what it would be like if we were to follow God's will perfectly. It is the ideal stated in the Lord's Prayer in which God's will is realized here on earth as it is in heaven. While there never has nor ever will be such a thing as a perfect world, we aim for that which is held up as the model and vision that reflects God's will in all things.

Jesus uses a series of images in a myriad of ways, one right after the other: the kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed... like yeast mixed with flour until it is leavened... like a treasure hidden in a field... like a merchant in search of a fine pearl of great value... like a catch of fish in which the good is separated out from the bad. Such familiar imagery illustrates for us what a perfect world would be like if we followed God's will perfectly.

The mustard seed illustrates how great things can come out of small beginnings. When you first plant a tree or shrub you can envision it growing large enough to attract nesting birds. What great things can happen when we begin with an idea whose time has come!

In the early 16th century, a German monk named Martin Luther became so concerned about the corrupt practices of his church that he compiled a list of 95 suggestions for reform and nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg. He had no intention of causing a schism and certainly did not want a separate denomination named after him. Because of this one man's indignation over conditions in the church the Protestant Reformation gathered momentum, bringing sweeping reforms. One of the great principles that came out of the Reformation is the emphasis on confessing our own faith through personal testimony to what we believe. The term *protestant* does not refer to protesting against something; it means giving personal testimony for what we believe.

It is the personal witness of the many reformers who came after Luther that gave rise to a far healthier church in which laity and clergy share in the leadership and responsibility of the church. Our salvation is not in the institution nor in the hierarchy but in our own personal faith in Christ.

When Jesus uses the imagery of leaven, he is illustrating how leaven changes the character of what is being baked. When a life is transformed by one person reaching out to another, the whole community of faith is strengthened. It is through the strength of our faith that evil is overcome by good and we are given a glimpse of that idealized vision of heaven being drawn closer to earth.

When Jesus uses the illustration of the treasure buried in a field, he knows that the best place for money is to put it in safe place. Given the fluctuations in the economy today, we can understand avoiding the speculations of a risky market. The man who finds the buried treasure is willing to give up everything to find it hidden in the field. In the same way, we have to be willing to give up our ambition for everything else in order to gain our soul, our conscience and our relationship with God for the total well being and integrity of our mind, body and spirit. When we accept the discipline of being a disciple, we are giving up everything else in order to follow the will of God and bring heaven and earth closer together.

When the realm of God is compared to a pearl of great price, it helps us to realize that the will of God is the most beautiful thing in the world. It brings light into darkness, joy out of despair and life out

of death. There are many great and beautiful things in this world, but to be in a right relationship with God and to find personal salvation for our soul is the most valuable thing for which a great price has already been paid in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. To be in a right relationship with God and at peace with ourselves requires giving up everything else.

In the imagery of the fishing net, we are reminded that both good and bad are gathered together as we discern what is good and useful in our lives from that which is of no use. Since every one deserves the redeeming love of God, everyone is included into the community of faith to have the opportunity to meet and know God.

What we refer to in the creed as the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic church is the universal church. The reality in having the goal of the perfection of the Kingdom of God on earth is that we set ourselves up for failure. We imperfect human beings will never live to see a perfect world. Yet, we continue to hold to the idealistic vision of the City of God and the New Jerusalem established here on earth. It is an ethereal vision, the goal for all of us to bring the finite and the infinite worlds closer together to close the gap between the ideal and the actual. Envision such a world in which all nations and religions respect each other and work together for the common good. This is a world in which there is an end to hunger and poverty and crime, and a world in which everyone has access to adequate health care. This is a world in which war is no longer used to assure peace and security.

Now bring this vision down to your own personal life. Perhaps you aren't where you thought you would be at this point in your life. Maybe your marriage and family isn't everything you hoped it would be. You may not be the person you always thought you were or hoped to be. What is crucial is how you live your life in that gap between the ideal and the actual.

Jesus saw people leading lives of self indulgence. He saw them trying to be something they weren't. He could have given in, he could have given up, but his mission was to fulfill God's will in being the most authentic man that ever lived. He chose to live and work in this imperfect world and surround himself with people with all kinds of personal shortcomings. All the great saints who witnessed to him in the history of the church began as fallible people who grew in faith and character.

We must never become discouraged when we see how we so easily fall short of the ideal. We have no choice but to work together toward that goal, no matter how unattainable it may seem. The English poet Robert Browning sums it up in his classic lines:

“Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?”

Andrea Del Sarto
1855