

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 12
Year A

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

If I were to go around the room and ask each of you what you think heaven will be like, I am sure I would hear things like heaven is a beautiful city with wonderful choirs and musicians and everyone happy and joyful, praising God and catching up with old friends and family. That is somewhat of the description we get from some portions of scripture. But Jesus never says anything like that in His teaching.

In our reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, as well as readings in the past few weeks, we get a different picture of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a wide variety of everyday objects and events. For example, to put today's comparisons into modern statements, the kingdom of heaven is like huge weeds coming up in our nicely planned garden (for the mustard plant was considered a weed by many in the first century), a little bit of wickedness to spice up the bread (because leaven was not the yeast of today, but a bit of spoiled bread), a thief who swindles someone out of a great treasure, and a used car salesman who sells everything he has to buy a rare antique car (for merchants' motives were always suspect).

None of these descriptions fit our idea of what the kingdom of heaven will be like, but these are the images that Jesus presented to those who listened to Him. What, then, did He mean by this?

In my opinion, this is a wonderful example of the idea that Jesus was never preparing His disciples for life in the next world – life in what we envision to be heaven. Jesus was teaching His disciples how to live in this world, to find heaven in this world now, and to be ready to teach others the same lessons.

The very first thing Jesus said after He experienced the temptations in the wilderness was, "The Kingdom of Heaven is near," according to the Gospel of Mark. He then spent the next three years or so gathering people around Him and teaching them how to live in this Kingdom. There were no promises of great military victories, much to the chagrin of some of His disciples. There was no promise of defeating the Romans and driving them out of Israel, as many hoped the Messiah would do.

Jesus talked a simple message of love and perseverance. He told stories about agricultural themes, about shepherds and crops, gardening and fishing. The message of Jesus was one that focused on the outcasts and the marginalized. He compared the kingdom of heaven to ordinary activities, performed by ordinary people – farmers, fishermen, women – and never about the rich and famous. His was a message that everyone had a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus finished this collection of parables with a simple question – “Have you understood all this?” When they said they had, Jesus gave them their marching orders – the same ones He gives us today, “Everyone who is trained for the kingdom of heaven brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” We have been trained to use the information – the scriptures and traditions – we have received to guide others in how to live in the kingdom of heaven now, in this place.

Jesus was not training His disciples for the sweet by and by, but for the messy work of this world. The Kingdom of Heaven is near, and it is at hand.