

Pentecost 8A

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:5-12

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At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you."

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Jesus put before them another parable: "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."

He told them another parable: "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."

"The kingdom 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."

"Again, the kingdom 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."

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Proclamation of the Word

Seeds and soil, weeds and wheat, mustard bushes, yeast bread, priceless pearls, a whole mess of fish, treasure.

Page | 2 Have you understood all this? Yes! the disciples say.

When Jesus speaks in parables about the kingdom of God, he speaks of ordinary things that help us imagine God's extraordinary, hidden, surprising purposes. Lest we think of these as sweet little notions, we read that from here, Jesus goes to his hometown where they do not recognize him as the Son of God. His true identity is just as hidden to them as that priceless pearl.

And lest we think of the rule of God, the kingdom of God, as safe and easy, we realize that right after that Herod has John the Baptist's head on a platter.

Jesus told stories comparing the Kingdom to a mustard seed that grows like kudzu, something common and annoying rather than great cedars of Lebanon.

Jesus talks of yeast- a symbol of something corrupt, dirty, and unclean to the Jewish listener. And it doesn't make sense. The amount of flour mixed with the yeast makes bread to feed a hundred people.

And it doesn't make sense to sell all you have to own to have a priceless pearl or a valuable field.

It sounds like the Kingdom is wild like kudzu, impractical, subversive, and hidden. How do we see something that is hidden, obscure?

Thermos joke- You may have heard the old joke:

The student says to the scientist, "In your opinion, what is the greatest invention ever?" To which the scientist replied, "The thermos bottle!" "Why?" asked the student, obviously confused. "Well" said the scientist, "it keeps cold drinks cold in the summer and hot drinks hot in the winter." holding up his thermos bottle in awe, "How do it know?"

How do it know? When faced with perplexing issues or in trying to discern the will of God, how do we know what God desires and wills? We get caught up in our limited vision or the trappings of comfort and lose sight of the Kingdom.

Will Willimon, a Methodist Bishop who grew up in Greenville, tells the story:ⁱ

When I was a junior in college, I was thinking about a lot of things, none of which included the Christian ministry. A friend talked me into going with him to a conference, "Exploring Ministry."

Well, I drifted through most of the weekend until late Saturday night when a group of South Carolina pastors sat in a hotel room talking about their lives. These were the days of the civil rights movement in

the South. One had been a victim of the Ku Klux Klan. He'd had a cross burned in his front yard. Another had a concrete block thrown through the back windshield of his car after a meeting. The wife and the children of another had been snubbed and persecuted in a small, Southern town.

Page | 3 *And I, in my lowly undergraduate imagination, thought to myself, "Wow! This sounds great! I didn't know that being a Methodist was this much fun!"*

Back then, anybody with a bus leaving to find buried treasure, well, count me in!

Oh, but then I got a degree, I got a job, I got tenure, I got reserved parking, and I bedded down. Now, if Jesus were to come up and say, "Hey, there's buried treasure around the next bend in the road," I would likely have responded, "Now, does this include health insurance? Do you guarantee that my sacrifice will be worth it? Do we have seat belts?"

We sing "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness." But then we get scared or practical or our vision gets clouded.

How do we seek first the kingdom of God, the will of God, when it is hidden and unclear?

We can take note of Solomon in today's passage. Solomon is praised for his wisdom in Scripture. We need "listening hearts" (Heb. *lev shome'a*). The NRSV translates the Hebrew into "discerning mind," but the Hebrew is "listening heart" which probably makes more sense. Our minds have to make sense of things, but a listening heart is open to God. A listening heart is the source of wisdom.

Solomon is having a dream where God speaks to him upon his taking on the role of King after his father, David. Solomon is first of all wise because he is humble and open to God's will. He admits that he is young and knows nothing of leading in battle. Solomon knows he is utterly dependent on God. He is humble. He is an empty vessel ready to be filled with God. He is the clay and God is the potter. This is the beginning of wisdom, relying fully on God. God blesses Solomon and provides for his people.

Rather than seeking treasure and victory, Solomon seeks first the kingdom of God. Not my will, but thy will, O Lord, we pray.

Just as Will Willimon heard pastors talking in a hotel room 50 years ago about working for civil rights for African Americans at great expense, expense to their families, their safety, and even reputation, those who seek the truest treasure will have discerning hearts and sell everything to follow the will of God.

In an interview with Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa during the 1980s when Apartheid still reigned and no end was in sight, Bishop Tutu said, "When the white people arrived, we had the land and they had the Bible. They said 'Let us pray.'"

When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible. And we got the better end of the deal."ⁱⁱ

The Spirit of God, the witness of the church of Jesus Christ, and people speaking up at great cost to themselves caused all sorts of havoc and transformed an oppressive system of Apartheid so all God's children might have basic human rights and needs met, so that they might be free.

In places of death and oppression, we can learn from our history.

As Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Seminary, writes,

*The kingdom of heaven, like the mustard seed invades the cultivated soil of our certainties and our boundaries and creates out of it all something new- "the better deal." Hidden within what we think we see so clearly, it is subversive and grows up in unexpected ways until what we thought we knew is transformed and redeemed by our surprising, invasive God.*ⁱⁱⁱ

When we have listening hearts and seek first the Kingdom of God, God promises that we will find it and even better we will know and rely on God.

That is the greatest treasure of all.

That is the "better deal."

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ⁱ ["Go for the Gold,"](#) Bishop William H. Willimon, *Day 1*, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Greg Jones, "Africa and the Bible," www.episcopalcafe.com, July 28, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Wardlaw, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 3*, Proper 12, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2011) p. 289.