

July 26th, 2020

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 “Reclaiming the Good News”

Okay, I’m going to pull out my prophet on the street corner’s sign today, but instead of “The End is *Near*,” it will say, “The End is *Here*.” We started this series “Reclaiming the Words and Teachings of Jesus” back in June with “Reclaiming Mission,” then we went on to, “Reclaiming Simplicity,” “Reclaiming Partnerships,” and then we spent two weeks on “Reclaiming the High Ground.” Plus we had two guest preachers along the way who dealt with the words and teachings of Jesus as well. The reason we started this series is that we recognize that we’re in the middle of a shift where the Kingdom of God is breaking through. We wanted to be sure that we, as Christ’s church on Earth, are in alignment with God as this shift occurs. Too many times throughout history, the church has been out of alignment, and it’s taken big shifts like the one we’re in now to get us back in alignment. Throughout this series, we’ve learned that the work of the church is a lot like farming. We’ve been commissioned to go into the world and proclaim Good News. The Good News is that God is Reconciling the World to God through Christ. Jesus compares this Good News to seeds. Our job is to scatter the seeds of the Good News everywhere we go. It’s not our job to determine who is worthy to receive it or not. It’s our job to live our lives in alignment with God by being living examples of Jesus here on Earth. We also learned that there is an enemy who is working against our effort to proclaim the good news. The Kingdoms of the World are not going to give up power easily because they know that when *God’s* reign is established, *their* reign is finished. Finally, we learned that our job is to tend the field and bring in the harvest when it’s time. It’s not our job to judge who is in and who is out. That’s God’s work. God owns the field. We’re just the workers.

I want to wrap this whole series up by focusing on this Good News that we are to proclaim. First of all, I want you all to have a clear understanding that one person’s good news is most often someone else’s

bad news. Especially when it involves a major shift in one's understanding of ethics or principles. Let's take accumulating wealth for example. There's nothing inherently wrong with accumulating wealth. Well ... let me clarify that. If you're accumulating wealth by selling illegal drugs or human trafficking or scamming people out of money, there's definitely something wrong with that. But if you run a successful business and through hard work, good timing, wise investing, and a little bit of luck you've accumulated some wealth? Good job. Nothing wrong with that. The question is, "What do you *do* with that wealth?" If the answer is, "I grasp, horde, and run people over to keep that wealth all to myself, or use it to oppress others or deny others basic human rights and freedoms so that I can stay in power," then you're going to have a hard time explaining or convincing others that this is in alignment with God's values. Maybe I should back up ... you *might* be able to convince other people that this is the case, especially if it benefits them or justifies their own sin. But you're going to have a terrible time convincing God that this is how one should *manage* wealth.

So back to the example of how we *measure* our wealth. I was listening to a podcast a few months ago about how humans around the world and throughout history define wealth. One of the guests was Ian Campeau, an Ojibwe, Anishinaabe Indian from the Nipissing First Nation in Canada. He was explaining how indigenous tribes who live off the land's resources have a different understanding of wealth than most of the industrialized world. In the industrialized world, we measure wealth by how much a person can accumulate. The guiding principle here is, "The more money and material resources I have, the wealthier I am." For most indigenous people, though, wealth is measured by how much money and resources I have to give away. If a person has accumulated a lot of resources through hard work, good timing, and a little bit of luck, that's great, but what makes them *wealthy* is how much they can give away. In indigenous cultures, if a person has accumulated a lot of resources, but needs to horde it, they're perceived as poor. So it's the

attitude of scarcity that makes one poor. You pity the person who lives in scarcity even though they seem to have a lot of resources. Campeau refers to this as a “gift economy.” He was talking about how he studied Jesuit logs and diaries from the 1600s where the missionaries were astounded by how generous the indigenous people were with their possessions. One missionary wrote, “The riches of this land are not found in the bowels of the earth, but in the perishables on the land.” So what do you suppose happened? Did the Jesuit missionaries and the empires they represent say, “Hey! This is a great system these indigenous folks have here! It’s so much less complicated than ours, and everybody seems to be happier and healthier. Maybe we should adopt this system!”? No. The “Good News” that the Jesuits brought to the Native Americans was the “grasp, horde, and compete” economy, and the “gift economy” got pushed aside. Again, one person’s good news is often another’s bad news.

So here’s what happens when Jesus’ followers came on the scene in the first century saying that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Rome and the Religious leaders who had capitalized on a corrupt system of government for generations said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand? Really? And what does this Kingdom look like? Who is your Lord and King?” They answered, “Jesus is Lord.” Rome said, “No. Here you may only say, ‘Caesar is Lord’ or else ... you pay the price. And sometimes that price means hanging on a cross for all to see what becomes of those who fail to give proper homage to Rome.” When the message of the gospel is proclaimed there is *immediate* pushback from the powers that be. No surprise though because they are the ones who stand to *lose* the most. The citizens of Rome? Especially the ones who are always at the bottom rungs of society? They’re the ones who stand to *gain* the most. So how do the followers of Christ ... the ambassadors of God’s Kingdom on earth expect to bring God’s reign into being? It sure isn’t going to be by force. It sure isn’t going to happen in the political arena either. So what’s it going to be? Those seem to be the

only two ways that *any* regime change ever happens. So what's it going to take? Thank goodness we have Jesus' words and teachings to show us the way.

This week, we've got five examples of what the Kingdom of God is like. It's like a mustard seed, a measure of yeast, a treasure hidden in a field, a valuable pearl, and a really good fishing trip. What do all of these things have in common? The mustard seed and the yeast represent things that start out small and grow big. Really big. Invasively big. So at first the Kingdom of God is going to look insignificant. "What ... who do these people think they are? They're just a bunch of renegade Jews who think they've found their Messiah. That's nothing new. Would-be messiahs are a dime a dozen around here. They'll either fizzle out like the rest, or Rome will pull the "law and order" card and put a stop to them. But what ended up happening? The church went from a small group of Jesus' followers to several scattered communities throughout the Roman Empire, to a global entity that has help shape history. Just like a mustard seed. Just like a little bit of yeast in the loaf.

The Kingdom of God is like a hidden treasure in the field. It's like a rare pearl. What do these two things have in common? They're both unexpected surprises that end up blessing the ones who found them. "I had no idea I was going to find this! How lucky can you get? I wasn't expecting this at all! What a blessing!" I take this to mean that the Kingdom of God is going to be better than we ever expected. Think of how long it looked like the church wasn't going to amount to anything. Just a bunch of losers from the backwoods of the Empire barely keeping it together. Always on the run. Always on the wrong side of the law. Hated by the movers and shakers of religion and politics. What could they possibly contribute to the world? What value are they? Surprise, surprise! As the movement gained momentum, people from all walks of life discovered the value of Jesus' teachings. When people saw how following Jesus could change their hearts and lives in such a profound

way, they couldn't help but share the good news with others. "Who would have guessed that Jesus' teachings could turn my life around and bring me closer to my Creator?" It's like finding buried treasure! Indeed.

Some preachers might be tempted to skip over this last comparison though. It starts out well, but then goes into uncomfortable territory. The Kingdom of God is like a net that's thrown out into the water and brings in fish of every kind. This makes sense considering that in chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus convinced three of his future disciples that if they'd follow him, he would make them "fishers of people." So to say that the Kingdom of God is like a net that is cast out into the sea and brings in every kind of fish goes right along with what Jesus is all about. He's not going after specific kinds of fish. He's going after all fish. And all means all, right? But then there's the follow up. The good fish will be kept, but the bad fish will be thrown away.

But this goes back to what we've been saying about the agricultural comparisons in this section. In the same way that it's our job to tend the field and God's job to separate the weeds from the wheat, in the sea it's our job to cast out the net and God's job to separate the fish. Determining which belongs and which doesn't is reserved for God. Ours is to deliver the Good News. And that's why I wrap this series up by presenting the idea that we need to reclaim the Good News. We are so quick to jump in to do God's job, we forget our job which is to simply deliver the Good News in word and deed. That's how we navigate this shift we're in.

We need to set out to do the work that God has commissioned us to do, not what we think we ought to do. Remember we're products of the Kingdoms of the Earth, and we always want to default to the ways of the Kingdoms of the Earth. This is why I say that we need to reclaim Jesus' words and teachings and that the church has lost its way. We don't need

to be lost. Jesus has shown us the way and leads us in that direction. We just have to trust and follow. I know we think we know better than God. I get it. We get frustrated when we can't see how everything is going to play out. We get impatient when we think we know who the weeds and the bad fish are. That's when we start making our own criteria for who fits into those categories. But any time the church has moved out of the realm of doing our work and into the realm of God's work, we've gotten in trouble. Church? Be the net. Be the treasure. Be the yeast. Be the seed. That's how the Kingdom grows when it starts to break through. It's God's timing, not ours. The Kingdom of God is at hand.