

Sermon: The Mysteries of the Kingdom

Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL READING:

In the 13th chapter of Matthew's Gospel he clusters a series of Jesus' kingdom parables. This morning we consider four very short parables that form two couplets; the mustard seed and yeast; the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value.

## SERMON:

The first 12 chapters of Matthew's gospel present the person of Jesus. Included there is a wonderful expose of his teaching... new, radical and mysterious... how the least is the greatest and the first will be last, and the like. But more significant than this compilation of his teaching is the presentation of this person of Jesus, himself... his manner of life... his compassion and love for the unlikely and the unlovely.

In explanation of his life and teaching Jesus said, "I do my Father's will, not mine; I speak my Father's word; not mine; when you see me you see the Father." Jesus was the Word of God... the Living Word of God fleshed out and lived among us. He was the embodiment of God's way and truth and life. Jesus makes God known to us.

As such, Jesus is a mystery. People respond to him in varied ways. Some are enraptured and captured. Some are suspicious and afraid, and some, indignant and hostile. Many are just plain baffled, not knowing what to do with this enigmatic figure.

The parables of Jesus, then, press us with the importance of our responses. What do we do with this Jesus and his new, radical and mysterious teaching and way of life? Are we receptive to this kingdom he preaches and teaches and shows us?

Before we go any further, it's necessary to understand what is meant by the term *mystery*. In its ancient linguistic form and in its biblical context the idea of *mystery* was quite different than what it means to most of us today. We commonly think of mystery as a secret for which no answer can be found. "It's a mystery... end of conversation." But in the writings of scripture the mystery has to do with that which *hidden* and still needs to be *revealed*.

In the Hebrew writings God is a God of mystery, but a God who reveals mysteries, making himself and his ways known to humanity. This morning we sang of this "hiddenness" of God.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise. In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.*

*All praise we would render; O help us to see 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.*

It is not that God seeks to hide from us. God is continuously showing himself; coming to us; making his ways known to us. The Psalmist declares:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.*

God is not a kind of cosmic riddle to be figured out, or a transcendent problem to be solved. The mysteries of God are not the result of God hiding from us. Rather the mysteries of God are his infinite glory and grandeur and the perfections of his love and grace hidden from our finite understanding, but being made known to us and yet to be made known.

The great theme of the New Testament is that God has revealed himself most fully and completely in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he named *Emmanuel, God-with us*, and in whom, John said, "We have seen the glory of the Father."

The Apostle Paul spoke of the mystery of Christ as the revelation of God; "With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will". And the writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus Christ as "the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's very being".

Now, you ask, what does all this have to do with the parables of Jesus? I'm glad you asked!

If I can't *assign* you to do it, let me at least *strongly encourage* you to read the whole of Matthew's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. Interspersed between some of the parables are conversations between Jesus and his disciples as to why Jesus speaks in parables. In answer Jesus speaks about "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven". The parables present hidden truths about the kingdom of God, not immediately discernable to everyone. The parables seem to reveal truth to those who are hungry and conceal truth from those who are blinded to it or short of hearing. Jesus speaks of how we have eyes to see but we do not really see, and ears to hear but we do not always hear. Our blindness and dumbness may be due to our hatred, prejudice or our indifference. Or it may simply be that upon hearing, we fail to be receptive to what we have heard and fail to act upon it. That's why Jesus keeps saying "Listen! Let anyone with ears, listen!"

Now here is an important key to this kind of spiritual comprehension and understanding. We do not understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God from outside observation. The hiddenness is revealed in our participation. That's why the parables keep pressing us for response; to receive the kingdom; to participate in it; hearing, receiving and doing the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not so much about what we do by our own initiative and effort. It's more about what God is doing in God's own way *through us!*

In his parables, Jesus presses the issue... What kind of soil are we? How receptive are we to the word of the kingdom? Do we really seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

As we allow God to be God in our lives; allowing him to rule and reign in our hearts, in our character and in our behavior, we become the very reflection; the expose of the mysteries of Christ; the embodiment of Christ's life and teaching.

The kingdom of God is not a geographical realm; it is Christ's reign in our hearts and his rule in our living. It's not a book or a system of religious order; it's *us*, as we become the living way of truth; the true way of living; the true and living way of Jesus Christ. The hiddenness of God's grace and love and mercy and justice is being made known in us and being shown through us. We indeed *are* the body of Christ; the embodied likeness of Christ in the world.

That's the kingdom of God! That's what the kingdom of God looks like! It's the hidden beauty of Jesus, not seen until it is revealed in us and expressed in our living.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed, seemingly insignificant, but a seed of hidden life. This parable is something more than a lesson about small beginnings or the potential of human initiative and ability. It's about life hidden mysteriously in that tiny seed, but life that is revealed and made known in great measure and to great good as it takes root and extends itself to be a home to all the nations and peoples of the world.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast mixed into a bushel of flour... hidden, obscure, yet it pervades and permeates and transforms the whole world. It is the essential character of the kingdom. It is the essential character in us. What is hidden and obscure is ultimately revealed to great and good effect. Like the tiny seed of life; like the yeast it grows quietly. It is never pretentious. There is nothing ostentatious about God's grace extended, permeating our lives and extending to the world around. But it has amazing effect. Phillips Brooks wrote:

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessing of his heaven.*

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like finding a treasure hidden in a field. A poor laborer unearths it and recognizes the value of this treasure, and immediately sells everything else for the joy of this all-surpassing treasure.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like finding one great pearl of value. A wealthy merchant, in his quest for fine jewels, finds this one pearl of such great value, and he immediately sells all the others for the joy of obtaining this one incomparable jewel.

That, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like! The pressing question then is, Are we like that?

Let me repeat: As we let God be God in our lives, allowing him to rule and reign in our hearts, in our character and in our behavior, we become the very reflection and expose of the mysteries of Christ; the embodiment of Christ's life and teaching. The hiddenness of God's grace and love and mercy and justice, is being made know in us and is being shown through us. We indeed *are* the body of Christ; the embodied likeness of Christ in the community around us into the world.

That's what the kingdom of God looks like!

I close with some thoughts that I have written in the August church newsletter.

I find the parables of Jesus to be both inspiring and indicting. I've preached them before, but what strikes me this time is that they are far more than easy little hints and helps to enable us in our efforts to cope with life. They are more than psychological boosts to our human potential.

They rip the rug out from under us! They are foundational to our whole way of thinking and living. They are tough because they are counter to the ways of life so thoughtlessly pursued by much of the culture around us. They describe a way of life (kingdom life) in which we become participants in the ways and truths and life of Jesus Christ.

Because the life and teaching of Jesus is so radical (radical, because so grace-filled) we tend to idealize it all as pie-in-the-sky stuff that stays up there somewhere; nice to behold and appreciate. But the parables press upon us the urgency and true relevance of allowing the life and teaching of Jesus to be the very foundation of our lives.

Henry David Thoreau said something that we may well apply to our response to the kingdom parables of Jesus.

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost;  
that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

Amen.