

Pentecost 6- Year A- Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52  
(July 23-24, 2011)- Intern Travis Wilson

I have probably told you all this before, but I really do not like being lost. In one of my previous sermons, I remember saying something about rejoicing one day earlier in my internship experience when I did not have to use my GPS or call Pastor Bill for directions to find one of our Keepers or a local nursing home. I have never been one that is good with directions- I get turned around in shopping malls, amusement parks, and sometimes even in my own neighborhood. Getting lost also gets my blood boiling- ask Kristen, I am not overly nice or affectionate when I am lost and have no idea what is going on; in fact, I am quite grumpy. I have been known to tell a couple of my drivers that I am very lucky to have them (and I am very blessed to have them in my life) because I cannot find my way out of a paper bag, and since they are driving, maybe we will actually get there. And, since we are in a spirit of confession, I will just lay it out there that I do not like getting lost in other areas of life either. I hate the fact that I am a slow reader and if something is particularly difficult reading material, I hate that I have to re-read portions because I do not understand the concepts. I hate when people talk in code, or that special insider language that I am supposed to know, but I obviously do not. I hate being lost, I hate feeling lost and confused, and I hate it when things in life feel as if they are hidden and I cannot find them.

I suppose then that I should watch my tone and tongue today because I am equally as lost and confused as the disciples and the crowds around Jesus when he tells them these parables today. In the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus sets before the crowd, his disciples, and us some parables that tell of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew uses the term kingdom of heaven to refer to the kingdom of God, and Jesus offers us illustrations as to what this kingdom is like.

Jesus tells us in Matthew, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, and that when this smallest seed is sown into the field it grows to become the largest of all the shrubs, a tree in which birds can make their

nests. Is this for real? A mustard seed becomes the greatest of all trees? I am not a trained horticulturist, but I do know that the mustard seed is like a speck on the ground; so, how is it that some speck is to become the largest of all plants, a great tree bearing shade for the birds? The mustard seed is more of a weed than anything else, and when it grows up, it is hardly a tree but rather a bush where birds can build their nests in. The kingdom of God is like this? Some weed like thing that grows in places it should not? I do not understand; it does not seem rational to me.

The crowd gathered around Jesus did not seem to understand it either, so Jesus tells another parable about the kingdom of God being like yeast that a woman mixes with three measures of flour until all of it is leavened. Again, this does not make any sense. The yeast in this passage is not the little packet or bottle of yeast that we use for bread, the Greek word for yeast here is leaven- that is the rotting, molded lump of bread. This molded lump is mixed with three measures of flour, and it produces enough bread to feed more than 100 people. A rotting, molded lump of bread makes good food, food that is not spoiled, but good food that feeds many people? Jesus, that is just absurd; how can the kingdom of God be like this?

Anticipating this question, our gospel lesson goes on to tell us of Jesus' response. Jesus tells us two more parables about hidden treasure in a field and a merchant in search of fine pearls. The kingdom of heaven is like someone finding a treasure in a field, hiding it, and then selling everything they have to buy that field because of the treasure. Likewise, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who sets out to find fine pearls. This merchant finds one of great value sells all that he/she has and buys this pearl. Great, more talk about money. Does Jesus not know that this is not how it works in our society? I work hard for everything I have, and sure I am in search of finding something great and worthwhile, but I am not about to sell everything I have just for it. What if I donate two bags of clothing to Goodwill, I know I can get rid of that without too much distress. Surely that will count, and I do not have to sell everything I own, right?

It is so hard not to get lost and confused in these parables. Jesus uses confusing words and examples that make no sense in our modern context, or even in the context of the ancient world. The mustard seed that becomes a great tree, the molding leaven becoming a feast of bread, hidden treasure in a field, and great pearls are not something that resonates with our own life experience. These things are foreign, unfamiliar, and confusing. Yet if we can somehow embrace being lost and open ourselves to what we might discover along the way; then we just might find the kingdom of God.

You see, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God is unfamiliar and confusing because the kingdom of God is not something we often experience in our world. The kingdom of God turns our expectations and our perceptions of what things should be upside down. The kingdom of God should not be like a mustard seed, it should be like an oak or cedar tree because they are large and in charge. God is big and grand and deserves something equally as grand, not some small mustard seed. The kingdom of God should be like the purest, finest ingredients in a loaf of bread, and it should be the softest and fluffiest bread right from the start. This kingdom should have no room for rotting leaven, molding lumps of ingredients that resemble corruption.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus continues to confound us and to turn our world upside down. In the kingdom of God, the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor/outcasts/and the downtrodden have good news delivered to them. The mustard seed that is really a lowly forgotten plant becomes an unexpected symbol of God's kingdom. Rotting, molding leaven mixes with flour to become a lavish feast—the kingdom of God is not what we expect. This is a kingdom that is against the status quo, this kingdom challenges all of what our society says is right. Society says buy more stuff to feel good about yourself, the kingdom of God says use your wealth to take care of others. Society stresses personal gain and individualism; the kingdom of God stresses love and care for neighbors and finds value in community. The kingdom

of God turns all of our ideas and values upside down and reveals to us a way of living that is scandalous and unexpected.

It is in the scandalous and the shocking that we see the love of God poured out for us. Jesus comes to live among us, embracing our humanity and experiencing the same suffering that we go through. He comes to us as a baby, a scandalous way for the Messiah to come into the world, the Messiah is supposed to be a military leader that will conquer our enemies and restore our honor; but this baby grows up to be a gentle ruler, one who has compassion for the least of all people, one whose mercy extends to all- the sinner and the sinned against. Jesus' death points out to us the very scandalous nature of the cross. The cross is a symbol of the Roman's power and those who are crucified experience it as shame, humiliation, and suffering. This is the power of the kingdom of God, Jesus' death on the cross reveals to us just how different the kingdom of God is- suffering and weakness reign, strength and domination are put to death. To our modern ears, this is absurd, but for the kingdom of God, this is what life and love is all about.

To embrace the kingdom of God means to enter into suffering, even into death. It means becoming uncomfortable with much of what our society values and even asking us to sell all that we have to find the treasure of the kingdom. In Jesus' parables of the treasure in the field and the fine pearl, he is showing us that following him and entering the kingdom of God is a costly thing- and sometimes it requires us to give up all that we have to embrace what the kingdom is about. However, these two parables also tell us about the sheer magnitude of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is so great that it cannot be kept a secret any longer, once you find the kingdom, you cannot help but to share it.

Bill Weber is a seminary professor that once told his students, "The Kingdom of God comes in inches, and we must learn to celebrate every small glimpse we can find." We know that God has promised there will be a day when we will finally live in the kingdom of God; but until that day, we live in the world of parables that describe and help us to imagine what the kingdom of God is like. For us and our world, we

see glimpses of the kingdom of God when unemployed people find a job, when addicts get sober, when the hungry are fed, the poor are cared for, the homeless find homes, when people find and live out of the joy in their lives, when religious leaders and even political leaders can set aside their differences and sit around a table and work together for the common good of people, when the grieving are comforted, when youth come to realize the power and love of God in their own lives and the lives of their friends, and anytime that we embrace what the world does not. The kingdom of God is filled with love, compassion, mercy, and peace; and as we see these glimpses of the kingdom in our world, we do indeed celebrate that God and love win.

So, I invite you to go with me into the world today and to get lost. Get lost today searching for and participating in the things that bring about these glimpses of the kingdom of God. Get lost sharing your faith with another person; get lost helping the less fortunate, get lost reaching out in love to other people. Get lost wherever you go; knowing that the kingdom of God is too priceless not to share.

Amen.