

Pentecost 11
July 27, 2008
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...." Matthew tells us that Jesus is teaching a crowd and uses a number of parables to help illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus is trying to help people catch a glimpse of a reality they can only imagine.

He begins with a parable about a mustard seed..... such a tiny seed. From this tiny seed comes an incredibly large plant. So God's kingdom starts small and grows to be large. Translating this into modern day terms I tried think of expressions of the kingdom I have known.

Charlie Penick, the rector of a downtown North Carolina church, suggested to me that handing food out the door to the homeless may not be the best solution to a growing problem. He wondered if we might not find a better answer, that seemed a good challenge to hand his assistant at the time. With the assistance of the diocesan Canon for community ministries, I began to explore what other churches were doing in a similar situation. I went to Charlie with the idea of opening a soup kitchen in the unused basement of the church building as an answer. It would take tremendous work and a lot of faith but I was convinced that we could make a difference in the community by partnering with other downtown churches to feed the hungry.

So we set about the transformation of the basement and began to engage other downtown churches in this idea of daily feeding the hungry among us. What started small became a soup kitchen and night shelter staffed by over two hundred volunteers from seven different congregations in the downtown area.

Today the Good Shepherd Care Center provides a hot meal each day, a place to take a shower or wash clothes, a clothing bank, a job referral service, a mail box for the homeless as well as a safe place to sleep at night. What started small has grown into a free standing community ministry to the least among the residents of the community.

"The Kingdom is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with flour. Yeast mixed with flour a baker knows the importance of yeast when making bread.

I think of an idea that was conceived among people of this parish. Affordable housing was and is an issue in the city. When the buildings next door to the church came available there were those among us who believed that we could make a difference. With the faithful investment of time, skill and dedication members of this parish rehabilitated the three row houses next door to the church as affordable housing. These three houses have become the yeast for the transformation happening on Beaver Street to provide decent housing and a safe neighborhood in this area of the city.

Jesus goes on with two parables, a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price. Think about what Jesus is saying when he uses these examples. The one who finds it is willing to give up all they have to obtain that which is of more value. What is it that we value most? What would you be willing to sacrifice all you have in order to obtain?

Scientists agree that pearls are the product of pain. The pain is caused by a foreign object entering the shell of an oyster and lodging in the tender membrane inside. Immediately the resources of the oyster rush to the spot where the breach has been made. The oyster secretes a substance that closes the breach and saves its life. A pearl is the result of stress, a wound that has been healed, a reminder of the oyster's struggle to survive.

We have all seen pearls come from unexpected places. There is a story told of a Norwegian sea captain so devoted to his work that he would leave his fiancée for months at a time to fish the waters of the North Sea. After the war, they married and migrated with their infant daughter to the United States. The captain took a job on a boat in the New York harbor but the open seas beckoned. Working his way up, he soon was captain of a sea going vessel. He would work one month on and one month off. Working that kind of schedule left little time for family and much less time for worship. The captain and his wife bought a peaceful cabin in the Pocono Mountains. The cabin demanded a lot of loving care and extensive repair if it were to become the retirement home they imagined.

Soon retirement came. The captain and his devoted wife moved to the cabin in the mountains. Not long after moving the captain had a seizure on the way into

town to purchase groceries. His wife drove him straight to the hospital. After several days of testing a neurosurgeon told him his seizures were caused by an inoperable brain tumor. The captain did not take the news well.

The captain expressed his anger to the hospital chaplain much of it directed at God. Yet, day by day he told stories of incredible faith as he guided his ship through storms and over rough seas. Gradually the medication worked to stop the seizures and the captain went home.

The hospital chaplain had grown quite fond of the captain so he made frequent visits to the cabin in the mountains. One day the captain told the chaplain he could not pray. "I try to pray but my mind wanders. I just cannot focus and get all mixed up. I have not prayed in so long maybe God does not want to hear my prayers, so God gave me this tumor."

The chaplain replied, "Captain, I do not believe that God gave you the tumor. I think God is like you, a man of the sea. God sets nets over the whole world gathering person after person and bringing them to faith. There are some who strain the net and escape. God hears their groaning and continues to throw out the net again and again to catch them in his grace and mercy. At this point we cannot see everything in God's net but I believe God will safely pull them to shore, in every oyster in that net will be a pearl of great worth."

One day not long before his death the captain said to the chaplain, "I have been praying." "Good, what have you prayed about?" "I just thank God for continuing to throw out the net and more than that for never giving up on me."

It is in the work and prayers of many faithful Christians that we catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven every day in our world. While we can only imagine what the fullness of the kingdom is like, we can certainly look around and see God present, working in the lives of faithful servants to touch the lives of those in need of God's grace and mercy.

We do not have to establish outreach ministries or plant a seed that transforms a neighborhood. But we do have an obligation to respond to God's call to join in as faithful servants with whatever resources, talents and gifts we have to share to the building up of God's kingdom.

When each one of us does our part, God working through us has the power

to transform, to renew, to invigorate so all people may know the grace and love of God.