

The Hidden Kingdom

Psalm 78:1-8, Matthew 13:24-35

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.” In an age of the great democratization of knowledge, or at least of knowing, we do not well tolerate that which is secret or hidden. In an age when we champion the public’s right to know everything, we are suspect of all that is secret and especially of that which is long held secret. So, what is it that has been hidden since the foundation of the world? What great thing does Jesus tell us here?

First of all, the kingdom of heaven, hidden though it may be now under signs of weakness and feebleness, will grow and prosper even in this unlikely world. In each of the three parables in today’s gospel reading, the kingdom of heaven is portrayed as living and growing: wheat in the field, a mustard plant, and yeast in bread. It is not in the nature of the kingdom of heaven to be still, to be static, or to decline. Sometimes obviously, more often quietly, always strongly and surely, the kingdom of heaven is growing and advancing and moving toward its final goal victory. This is the will of God, and this is the work of God in God’s good world. In this we can have confidence, joy, and hope.

Second, not only will the kingdom of heaven will grow, but also it will prosper and be victorious. This is not at all obvious now. There are opposing forces who hold sway on the field. In fact, that is exactly what these parables are about. The kingdom of heaven is not obvious now. It looks like a field of wheat hidden under young, vigorous weeds. It looks as tiny as a mustard seed, or as insignificant as yeast. But current appearances are deceiving. The kingdom is marked by a contrast between small beginnings and spectacular conclusions. One day, the weeds will be destroyed and the wheat will be safely gathered in the barn. One day, the tiny mustard seed will have grown into a tree where birds nest. One day, the tiny particles of yeast will have made a huge quantity of bread rise. One day, the kingdom of heaven will have grown into fullness, maturity, and victory. Then it will be obvious to all. As for now, this knowledge is available only to those who have ears to hear the word of God preached in the parables of Jesus Christ. Someday, God will reign supreme, in all justice and righteousness. Until then, our confidence in this good hope for the future gives us courage to hang on.

Third, not only will the kingdom grow, and not only will it be victorious, but also God will receive a large harvest and will preserve it forever. That is what it means that the wheat is gathered into the barn, or, as the parable says, into “my

barn.” This speaks of God’s eternal safekeeping of the people of God. There is a reason for what God is doing. There is a purpose. There is a goal. And the purpose is for God to gather us all into an eternal fellowship and communion with himself, forever beyond the power of death, forever beyond the power of decline and decay, forever beyond the power of sin and evil. God will keep us for himself. Here is a source of great joy and hope.

All of this leads, of course, to the other side of the parable. The great victory of the kingdom of heaven means also that evil will be defeated. In the first parable, evil is portrayed as the weeds that infest the wheat field. At the end, the weeds are collected and bound in bundles to be burned. This means that evil is identified, it is recognized for what it is, it is extracted from the good of creation, and it is eradicated and destroyed. That may be frightening to some people, but it is not meant to be frightening. It may be disappointing to some people, who would like to see the destruction of evil come earlier, but it is not meant to be disappointing. The parable is meant to be reassuring. God is aware of the existence of evil. God, who may seem to be silent or unaware of the pain of our lives, knows the problems caused by evil. God, in God’s good time, will root out and destroy every bit of evil. Confident of God’s victory, we are given strength and courage to endure from day to day. Evil will be defeated.

Notice how evil is portrayed. It is a latecomer in the parable. God’s good creation came first. Evil was no part of it. Evil came later, from another source. This means that evil is not part of God’s intention for the world or for our lives. Notice also that evil is the first to leave the parable. That is, evil is removed, while the good is kept as permanent. So while evil is not God’s doing, it is not God’s undoing, either. While not part of God’s intention, it does not catch God by surprise, off-guard, or unprepared. God provides for the destruction of evil. That is why we are given courage to endure. In fact, the main point of this first parable is that it is not up to us to go rooting out the evil weeds ahead of time. That would do more harm than good, killing good wheat along with the evil weeds. It is not up to us to say who is evil and who is good. It is not up to us to say who is condemned and who is saved. Someone else will make those decisions.

What does this good news of the hidden kingdom of God have to do with our lives today? For one thing, this teaches us how to regard evil. On the one hand, it acknowledges the reality of evil. On the other hand, it asserts that evil will be defeated, and therefore that, in principle, it is already defeated. This means that evil should be taken seriously, but not too seriously. It is real, but it is not permanent. Think about this: evil is there--in our world, in our society, in our church, in our hearts and souls--it is there, but it is not always going to be there. It is more than we

can handle, but it is not more than God can handle. And God has already taken action to defeat and dispose of evil.

Today's gospel reading acknowledges the reality and power of evil, but it refuses to acknowledge it too much. This is an important message for us today. Some people do not take evil seriously enough, either in the world or in their own hearts and lives. They either fail to see it, or they think it is an illusion, or they think it is easily defeated. This kind of thinking is dangerous because it fails to acknowledge the reality and power of evil, it fails to realize that the power of God will be required to defeat evil, and it fails to take even the most rudimentary precautions. On the other hand, there are some people who take evil too seriously, either in the world or in their own hearts and lives. While acknowledging the reality and power of evil, they fail to perceive that God has already provided for the defeat of evil. They wrongly think that evil not only overwhelms humanity but also threatens to overwhelm God. This is a distinctly non-Christian view. Again, what these parables tell us is that evil is real but not permanent. It will be defeated.

So, the words of the gospel are meant to reassure us that evil is a latecomer to our world, that it is not a permanent fixture of our lives, and that its eventual defeat and eradication are sure. These words of reassurance are meant to strengthen us to endure evil in the world and even in the church. The parable teaches the church that purges and inquisitions are more harmful than helpful, more evil than good. It is not up to us to ask people to leave the church of Jesus Christ. Time will tell. People will be known by their fruits. They will bear either good or evil. But that is not ours to sort out. This is not to say that we condone evil, or that we sympathize with it, or that we naively deny or ignore its existence. But it is to say that God has made provision other than us for taking care of it. God will remove those whom he does not want in the church or in the kingdom.

Ironically, if we resist evil in kind, evil has already won. The devil loves to see open strife and warfare in the church. It means that he is getting ahead. So then, are we not to resist evil at all? We do have one model for that, and it is the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus resisted evil by willingly suffering its worst attack and onslaught. So do we resist evil in the church not by striking back but by taking and absorbing the hurt of its attack. That is how evil is spent and undone, when it is not replicated in the object of its hatred.

This parable stands against dangerous attitudes in the world in which we live. Once when I was pastoring a church in Georgia and while I was moderator of the presbytery there, Deb and I and a number of others took part in a civil rights march. Standing on the hills above us were hatemongers bearing signs that read, "Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out!" That is too often the way of the world and the answer

of the world. This parable says exactly the opposite: “Let them all live; God will sort them out.” This has implications for beyond the church.

In another particular, it seems to rule out capital punishment. No one in the world, and no government in the world, is smart enough, wise enough, or good enough to decide that someone is a weed, that someone is irredeemable, and that someone should be put to death. Those are not decisions which are proper to human beings; God will sort all that out later. But back to the church.

Just as it is the nature of the kingdom of heaven to grow, so it is the nature of the church to grow. We would not want to say that the church is identical to the kingdom of heaven, but we would not want to make too great a separation, either. In small, broken, and always-to-be-improved-upon ways, the church in the world today provides a sign and a vision of the kingdom yet to come. We are meant to be a colony of heaven. And so it is part of the nature of the church to grow. This is part of what we are about: proclaiming the gospel to those who have not heard it, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with those who have not known it, gathering more and more people here to worship and serve God. Somehow, the church at large seems to have forgotten this! Somehow, the church over the last forty years has grown content with stability. But of course, there is no stability. The church either grows or it dies. It either moves forward or backward. For at least forty years, many of the churches in America have been moving backward and dying.

Now is the time for change. Now is the time to hear again the parables about the spectacular growth of the kingdom. Now is the time for us to be committed again to the growth of the church. From one perspective, all the church needs is the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God, which is to say that all church growth depends entirely upon the grace of God. That is absolutely true. It does not mean, however, that we have to be reduced to inactivity. For, from another perspective, the grace of God which nurtures the church works in and through people. It works in and through a thousand little things that you and I do. When you invite someone to church, the gospel is announced. When you pray for someone in need, love is nurtured. When you offer your food, your clothing, your money, your self, to help those in need, the kingdom of evil is dealt a serious blow. When you teach a Sunday school class and teach a child a Bible verse and teach him or her about the love of God in Jesus Christ and in the church, you plant a tiny seed that should bear a great harvest in the years to come. When you bring someone with you to church to worship God, to hear the gospel, and to make a new commitment of life to Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven advances. It is time for the church to remember this, to rejoice in it, and to make a renewed commitment to it.

It is in the nature of the kingdom of heaven, and therefore it is in the nature of the church, to grow. On the one hand, that is up to God. But in so far as God has

chosen to work in and through us, let us work hard, and diligently, and honestly, and joyfully, presenting ourselves before God as workers who have no need to be ashamed. Let us not be satisfied with stability. Let us not yield to decline. Let us never think of church growth as if it were a nice extra but not a real part of what it means to be the church. Instead, let us make a commitment to vigorous, kingdom-like church growth, as a part of our living out of the gospel.

“All this Jesus said to the crowd in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.’”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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