

WHERE OUR TREASURE LIES

1 KINGS 3:5-12

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MATTHEW 13:31-52

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SOUNDS LIKE SO MUCH ELEVATOR MUSIC!

That was the way one biblical scholar described the parables I read just a few minutes ago. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, or a bit of leaven in flower, or a treasure found in a field. Like elevator music these stories just flow through our ears and over the surface of our brain without making any impression, without disturbing how we think or act. Never in my 35 years or so of pastoral ministry has anyone asked me to preach a sermon on these parables. No one ever asks me to read them at their father's funeral, saying that they were Dad's favorite Scripture. Rather, these parables seem to be of the "in one ear and out the other" variety.

WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT IS?

Part of the answer lies in the huge gap between Jesus' culture and our own. He formed the parables out of the stuff of their everyday experience.

The smallness of the mustard seed compared to the largeness of the bush it produced was proverbial in Jesus' culture, but not in ours.

Now had Jesus said something like:

- The kingdom of heaven is like a ninety year old man who buys thousands of acorns and plants them knowing he won't live to sit under the shade of the trees, but who nevertheless rejoices that others will. Or,
- The kingdom of heaven is like a man who pulls up to a stoplight just as it goes red against him, but who rejoices that those on the cross street now have a green light and can go on their way. Or,
- The kingdom of heaven is like 90,000 rabid American fans jammed into the Rose Bowl stadium to cheer on the Americans in a soccer match against China. But when China prevails, the Americans rise as one and cheer the Chinese, realizing that they too are children of God, and therefore our brothers and sisters. Or,
- The kingdom of God is like a man who planned all year for a golf trip at a fabulous resort. But when he arrived, it rained so hard the entire week that the course was closed so that he could not play even one round. Nevertheless he rejoiced because he knew that the farmers needed the rain.

Perhaps if the parables had been drawn from a culture more like our own, we would be more interested in hearing them.

OR MAYBE THE PROBLEM GOES DEEPER THAN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.

Perhaps these scriptures are not among our favorites because the topic of the kingdom of heaven fails to interest us. Maybe the coming of that kingdom is not a front-burner item with any of us. Let's be honest here: do any of us awake in the middle of the night and cry out, "O that the kingdom of God would draw near"? Must we not confess that we pray the part of the Lord's prayer which has to do with giving us our daily bread, forgiving our sins, and delivering us from evil with more intensity than we do the part about "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? Maybe Jesus' trying to interest us in the kingdom of God is a bit like an eighth-grade English teacher trying to interest the class in diagramming sentences, or a Social Studies teacher trying to generate enthusiasm for early colonial farm practices.

SO WHY ARE WE NOT MORE INTERESTED IN GOD'S RULE AND ITS ARRIVAL ON EARTH?

Perhaps we will learn the answer by looking at what does interest us:

- Entertainment comes to mind. Many of us will drive hundreds of miles and shell out big bucks to go to a football game or attend a concert by Taylor Swift or Billy Joel. Annually millions of us are

glued to our television sets to watch the World Series, the Super Bowl, The Masters, Wimbledon, or the Daytona 500. I pass over the American Idol obsession without even mentioning it. People will line up at midnight to watch the latest Super Hero movie, and heaven help us if Hollywood brings out another Star Wars episode. Had Jesus been a bit more of a showman as he spoke about the kingdom perhaps we would pay more attention to what he said.

- We are also very interested in money. Money dominates the news every day. We are obsessed with the ups and downs of the stock market, the price of crude oil, the actions of the FED, the interest rates offered by banks, the amount of dividends our stocks are paying. Had Jesus spoken about how to improve our financial situation, we would be all ears.
- We are interested in fitness and the latest technology. Now if Jesus had offered us the secret to physical wellness, a sure-fire diet, or a new and improved cell phone we would pay him more mind.

BUT JESUS WILL NOT DO THAT.

Jesus will not let us set his agenda, write his speeches, or determine what is true and lasting. Jesus is the least market driven person in the history of the world. He hires no pollsters, commissions no focus groups, and he could never get elected to public office because he refuses to tell us what we want to hear or give us what we want to have.

You see, the problem is that the kingdom of heaven is not primarily about us. The kingdom of heaven is about God. It is in fact a shorthand expression for what God is doing in the world, what God's agenda is, what God's goals are. The kingdom of heaven is all about the new creation God is bringing in; it's about what God wants for His world. ***We “ho hum” these parables because they are not about us, and we are mostly interested in us.*** We want Jesus to talk about us. We want to know what he is doing for us. We greet Jesus as do children when their father returns home from a business trip, “What'd ya bring us, daddy?” We are much less interested in God than we are in ourselves. By the way, this is precisely what sets us off from Jesus. He was primarily interested in God, His will and His ways. Jesus was a “not my will but thine be done” person. This gap, this chasm between Jesus and us is what the Bible calls “sin”.

OUR SIN IS TWO-FOLD.

One, we are not intensely interested in the things of God. Two, all too often we are interested in the things which oppose God and His coming rule. Jesus often defines that coming rule of God over against violence in which humans are constantly involved, over against lust in all its forms, over against infatuation with money and all it can buy, and over against a pre-occupation with comfort and security. Jesus wants to teach us to sing God's praises, but we want to learn the lyrics to “Hooray for us!”

Jesus tells us that those who put themselves last will be first and that the “me-firsters” will be last. He speaks of serving not being served. ***Thus, these kingdom of heaven parables reveal to us how very far we are from that kingdom and its values.*** They further proclaim loudly and clearly that we are not the center of the universe. They announce in no uncertain terms that God will bring in the kingdom He wants in the manner which He chooses without consulting us. It is harder for us in our culture to hear this than it was for people in Jesus’ time to hear it, precisely because we expect to be heard. When the recorded voices announces that our call is important to them, we think “and it should be!”

**FOR THREE WEEKS WE HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO JESUS
SPEAK PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM.**

We have been listening to Jesus speak of the rule of God and its coming, against all odds. Perhaps the most important thing we have learned is that we have a long way to go before we are ready to enter and live in this kingdom. So maybe Jesus told these stories to drive us to our knees, to ask for forgiveness, to repent, and to beg for the gift of being kingdom directed. Maybe we should spend some time each day asking God to transform us from being pleasure seekers into kingdom seekers. One thing is certain, if we are to desire and seek the kingdom of God, if we are to be good citizens of that kingdom, it will be by the grace of God and not

by anything we achieve. Maybe it's a good thing that the kingdom tarries long, because it is obvious that we all have a long way to go. Thank God that the One who is bringing in the kingdom loves and cherishes each and every one of us long before we love and cherish Him.