

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 30, 2023 – 9 Pentecost
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – Parables of the Kingdom
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In recent weeks we have heard readings from Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible. In this book we learn, among other things, the early history of the Jewish people, starting with the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah. In their old age God blessed them with a son, Isaac. He married Rebecca, and they had twin sons, Esau, the first to be born, and Jacob. It was a strong custom of the time to give preferential treatment to older children over younger children. Two weeks ago, we heard the story of how Jacob had cheated his older brother Esau out of his birthright (Genesis 25:27-34). Jacob was cooking a stew, and Esau came in from a day of hunting, famished. Jacob refused to give his brother any food until he “sold” his birthright to Jacob. As Esau replied, “I am at the point of death, so what use is my birthright to me?” And the deal was done.

This morning we heard the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. Marriage among the people of that time, if they were from the families of well-to-do herdsmen, involved a business transaction. Suitors for a daughter promised a payment in money or animals, as a recompense for removing the daughter from the household. Jacob's payment to Laban (who was his uncle, his mother's brother) was his labor, since he had no wealth of his own as yet. By “paying” for the bride, the suitor was asserting his opinion of her worth. Though there was no law commanding that children could only be married in order of their birth, Leah would have been dishonored to have the “worth” of her younger sister asserted before her own worth. Laban acts to restore the right order of “honor” between the two sisters: the older is honored, or deemed “worthy,” first, and then the younger.

All this sounds honorable, but it is clear that Laban intended to cheat Jacob, to get another seven years' work out of him so that he could have the woman he loved for his wife. The ancient rabbis thought that the deception and cheating Laban used against Jacob were just recompense for Jacob cheating his brother Esau out of his birthright.

These are very human stories, aren't they? Stories of people motivated by rivalry and by greed. Stories of deception, of selfishness, of hypocrisy.

Jesus taught that these qualities of human behavior are contrary to the will of God, unlike the kingdom of God, and have no place in the vision of peace and wholeness in human community conveyed by the term “shalom.” Jesus questioned people as to their motives. He probed their hearts. He sometimes seemed unmerciful in his confrontations with hypocrites, with people who exploited others, with the self-righteous. His mission was to preach and teach God's kingdom.

In this morning's lesson from the Gospel of Matthew we find five very brief parables. It is unlikely that Jesus spoke them one after the other, as we have just heard them. He probably used them at various times, and Matthew grouped them together for literary reasons.

I would like to focus on the third and fourth of these short parables. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

These two parables point to the supreme value of the kingdom of God. When people discover God's kingdom, when they experience the love of God, when they know Jesus, life's priorities are changed. God takes precedence over everything else.

In the first of these parables a man – probably a poor man, since he had to sell everything he owned to purchase one field – stumbles upon a treasure. He wasn't looking for treasure. He was probably plowing, as he did most days, when the blade of the plow struck a jar containing valuables. Totally unexpected treasure found in an ordinary field! For many of us, that is how we find God. We are busy with ordinary life – with work and family, perhaps even church activities – and suddenly God breaks into our lives. Through human love. In an extraordinary moment of seeing the beauty of the world. Through the kindness of a stranger, the words of a book, the line of a hymn, the bread and wine of the Eucharist, help from an unexpected source in a time of need. When we think over our lives, haven't we all been touched by God this way, when we have known in our hearts that the Lord has been at work? These are priceless moments.

In the second parable the pearl merchant is a seeker, a wealthy man in search of one of the ancient world's most valued objects, fine pearls. He is on a quest, and when he finds what he is seeking, he gives all that he has for this treasure. Some of us are like this man. We have been searching for something all our lives – for meaning, for answers to our deepest questions, for something beyond the ordinary, beyond the limitations of human life, for our true home. We keep seeking, investing more and more of ourselves in the search for God, with growing faith in the promise of Jesus, "ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). God is a treasure worthy of all we have. The kingdom of heaven is near when, with joy, we exchange everything for that treasure.

Human beings have always cheated one another, have always made promises that are broken, have always pretended to be better than they are, have always acted selfishly. Perhaps you have known the pain and disillusionment of being on the receiving end of such behavior. Jesus gives us hope. Life will not always be this way. Even now, God breaks into ordinary human life, and we are blessed to know God's love, God's healing power, God's mercy and compassion. Jesus promises that God's kingdom will finally be established forever. With faith and hope may we seek and serve God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, guided by Jesus who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In the name of the Lord. Amen.