

Sermon—Sunday, July 27, 2008
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)
By JoAnn Taylor

First Lesson: **Genesis 29:15-28**
Psalm: **Psalm 105:1-11, 45b**
Second Lesson: **Romans 8:26-39**
Gospel Lesson: **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

All glory and praise to thee, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and for ever.
Amen.

As I was preparing for this homily, I came across an article that had appeared in Good Housekeeping several years ago. The author was Louise Wyse and she was providing guidelines for picking the perfect husband. Here's what she said:

There are six ways to learn everything you need to know about a man before you decide to marry him. First, watch him drive in heavy traffic. Second, play tennis with him. Third, listen to him talk to his mother when he doesn't know you're listening. Fourth, see how he treats those who serve him – waiters/waitresses, ushers, maids, service attendants, etc. Fifth, notice how and on whom he spends his money. Sixth, look at his friends. Then, if after all that, you're still not sure, take a look at his shoes. A man who keeps his footwear in good repair will tend to do so with the rest of his life as well.

Guidelines. That's what Jesus is trying to do - provide some guidelines to his disciples about who he is, about his ministry, about his purpose on earth, about the discernment of spiritual truths – and about the kingdom of heaven. Each of the parables in Matthew's gospel – including the reading from last Sunday about the sower – has an important underlying message for the people. Let's take a look at these messages:

The first parable we'll discuss is the sower – last Sunday's reading – because it actually sets the stage for the rest of this discourse. Jesus himself actually teaches us a bit about the meaning of this reading – he is the Son of Man – the sower of the seed – and we are the harvest – the wheat and/or the weeds that grow as a result. But there are some other signs that need to be understood. The four types of soil mentioned represent the different

responses the people have toward Jesus and the message he preaches: the resistant response – the soil is hard and the seeds cannot penetrate to take root; the shallow response – the roots of the plant cannot reach beneath the limestone that lies under the top soil – the plant withers and dies; the distracted response – the soil is infested with weeds and thorns that choke the good plants – represents the material wealth and earthly pleasures that keep us from Christ; and last but not least, the productive response – the seeds take root and the result is an abundant harvest for the kingdom of God. Anything that prevents us from coming to God through Christ is an enemy – a weed – a stumbling block in our spiritual journey. The message – we need to keep Jesus and God first in our lives if we are to grow and become strong in our faith.

The second parable illustrates the power of one. The mustard seed is not the tiniest of seeds – that honor goes to the cypress tree seed – but, in the ancient world, the mustard seed was the measure of smallness. From this small seed, a tree, 8-12 ft tall would grow and become a refuge for flocks of birds seeking shelter for their nests as well as the nourishing seeds for food. Travelers to Judea found this sight remarkable – so much so, that the tree became a symbol of huge empires – the long branches of which signified their far-reaching borders and the birds signified the subject nations who sought their protection. {pause} The point Jesus is making here is that no matter how great something is, all things begin with the smallest of ideas. Even something as huge as the Great Wall of China began with the laying of a single brick – and another – and another – and another until finally the resulting wall was completed. Every reformation begins with a single idea – someone who is willing to stand up and say what needs to change – to stand against all odds even at the risk of his or her own life. That’s what Jesus did – his ideas and ministry upset the status quo – and he paid for it with his life – but those who crucified him did God’s work for the redemption of the world – and those ideas – those ideas have grown and spread – are continuing to grow and spread even now over 2000 years later. That is the ultimate power of one – and we – each one of us - are the tiny mustard seeds that must continue to spread the good news until all become one in God’s kingdom.

The third parable - the parable of the leaven - is used by Jesus for shock value. Leaven in the Jewish language is synonymous with evil because they believed the fermentation process was similar to putrefaction – rotting flesh. This belief was so prevalent, that the preparation for Passover included removing all of the leaven from the house and destroying it to cleanse the home of its evil presence. Imagine their surprise when Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a small ball of starter dough – something they considered evil. The point Jesus is making here though is that the leaven’s transforming power is similar to the transforming power of the kingdom of God. It is representative of our lives without Christ – unleavened bread –

and what our lives are like with Christ – leavened bread. Unleavened bread is flat, dry, hard and not very appetizing – like a stale biscuit - basically, lifeless. Leavened bread – as we all know – is soft, tastes good and smells so delicious when it's fresh from the oven – basically, life-giving. This parable is also representative of the social changes that Christianity brought to the world in 4 areas – the lives of women, the lives of the aged and infirm, the lives of the sick and destitute, and the lives of children. It was the teachings of Christ that planted the tiny seeds of change in the minds of Thalassius, Apollonius, and a lady named Fabiola – the founders of the first asylum for the blind, the first medical dispensary, and the first hospital – the care of the sick, aged, infirm and destitute – the outcasts of society. It was also the teachings of Christ that changed the lives of children – from a society where they were unwanted burdens that were left to die, killed outright or sold – to a society where children are treasured gifts of God to be loved and cared for – our heritage and future.

Remember – this parable is the transforming power of the kingdom of heaven.

The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl offer two versions of the same message – the kingdom of heaven is a treasure beyond compare. Jesus himself paid the price of our admission by his death on the cross for our sins – all we need to do is believe in the eternal love and mercy of God. In both parables, the men find great wealth, hide it, then they go off to sell all they possess in order to purchase the great treasure. Later in the gospels, Jesus provides us with a clear picture of the meaning of this parable. He meets a wealthy young man who asks him – “Teacher, what must I do to obtain the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus’ response is to go, sell all that you own, take up your cross and follow him. That is the point of these two parables – the kingdom of heaven is a treasure so incredible that no earthly treasure is equal to it – one must be willing to give up all they possess – after all – God gave up his only Son so that we could have access to this glorious kingdom. The price paid was beyond compare for a kingdom beyond compare – and once we realize that – we should willingly put God before all else in our lives.

The theme of the parables we’ve heard discussed here is both simple and complex. On the one hand you have a vision of growth – the seed and the leaven are powerful pictures of what it takes for the kingdom of heaven to grow. It takes a seed – an idea – taking root in our minds – someone to give voice and life to the idea so that it can set and begin to grow – many workers with the energy and faith to give the idea a life of its own – someone with vision to nourish it so that it can keep growing, spreading and changing. It takes the transforming power of new ideas – youthful energy and mature wisdom need to combine – just like the leaven changes the composition of the dough – new ideas and change are critical for the survival

of the kingdom – without it, the weeds take over and choke the life out of any potential growth. Just like a field at harvest, every so often we need to clear the fields of our minds and hearts – get rid of the old junk – keep what is useful and adaptable – store it for future use – then plant a new field with fresh seeds – let the seeds germinate and take root – watch them grow – nourished by other similar ideas – until.....once more we are ready to harvest the fresh ideas that can bring growth to our corner of God's kingdom.

It takes hard work. It takes faith and trust to be willing to meet God's call – to actively seek his call in all things – to give ourselves completely into his care and guidance. At the conclusion of his teachings – Jesus says let every scribe that becomes a disciple for the kingdom of heaven be like a householder who must mix the new with the old. We must take the wisdom and mistakes of our past – learn from them – and then use what we learn to improve what's here.

Christianity is not a peaceful, quiet religion. It's a religion that shakes up the status quo, infuses new life and change into stagnant waters, and creates violent winds out of still air. More than once Jesus tells his disciples that he did not come to bring peace into the world – he came to bring violent upheaval, to cause conflict between families, neighbors and nations, --- he came to bring change. Sometimes the changes are harsh and visible for all to see – other times the changes are quiet like the rushing water of an underground river – you can't see the water – but every so often, it comes to the surface and you see the changes. It takes all us working together – clergy and laity - to achieve growth in and for the kingdom of heaven. If we insist of letting others do the work – or on working alone - we will suffer burn-out and become ineffectual in our mission.

And finally there's the following story:

A minister stood in front of his congregation on a cold Thanksgiving Day and prayed, "Let us give thanks for good health." Twenty people in the congregation who were sick got up and left. He continued, "Let us give thanks for our homes." Ten people who were homeless left the church. "Let us give thanks for beauty and wonderful minds." Ten more who felt neither beautiful nor brilliant walked out the door. "Let us give thanks for friends." Five who felt they had no friends got up and left. And finally, the minister said, "Let us give thanks for justice." Five more left who felt no justice in their lives. The minister finally lifted his head.....and looked out into an empty sanctuary – his congregation had stood up and walked away. Then the minister heard a still small voice – the voice of God – saying, "When have I promised wholeness of body or health, or earthly comfort? When did I promise friends, or beauty or intelligence? You would do well to

remember my servant Job; to remember my son, Jesus." The minister ran out the door and called to his wandering flock, "My friends, I have deceived you. We may have good health, homes, friends and justice – but, all we can really count on in our lives is God." His congregation came back into the church and this time the minister prayed, "Let us give thanks to God, that he is always with us in this world and the next, for ever and ever" and the people responded with a loud, "Amen."

The minister had forgotten that the reason God sent his son into this world was to save us from the consequences of our sins. He did so not just by his death on the cross, but by providing an example for us to live by – guidelines - a pattern to try and imitate. Jesus is the master sower – the planter of all seeds – you and I – every Christian for 2000 years – and even those "seeds" that have not yet begun to grow – all have been sown. Our religion is ever changing – not stagnant – and so we must always be looking for ways to change and better our ministry to God's people. If we take care of each other, growth and change will come – and with it the life-giving Spirit of God to guide us.

We must all work to spread the news of the kingdom of heaven until all the kingdoms of the world are united in the one great kingdom of God. This is the message of the parables. Amen.