

Sermon for August 2, 2020—“Rethinking Heaven”

Eighteenth Sunday in OT, Year A – Text(s): Matthew 13:10-17, 31-33, 44-53

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I think it's safe to say that reality usually defies our imaginations. For one thing it's immensity. I don't know, I just get this picture of heaven being huge. I mean really, really huge! I probably get that from what is possibly my favorite C.S. Lewis book, *The Great Divorce*. It tells the story of a bus ride from hell to heaven and when Lewis arrives in heaven and steps off the bus he writes that he had "...this sense of being in a larger space perhaps an even larger sort of space than I had even known before. As if the sky were farther off and the extent of the green plain wider than they could be on this little ball of earth. I had got out in some sense which made the whole of the solar system itself seem an indoor affair." That's big!

For those sorts of people who ponder the mysteries of life, thinking about the Kingdom of God, about heaven, is as attractive as it is frustrating. There are so many possibilities, yet few particulars. Dreaming big comes pretty easy for most of us. We are taught to dream about the future at an early age. We were asked "What do you want to be when you grow up? Back when I was a kid we would say things like a baseball player, an astronaut, a rock star, a doctor, a lawyer, maybe even president. Back then we were limited only by our imagination. But the motivation to dream big doesn't end in childhood but rather is ramped up and stakes are higher as we grow older. Imagine life with that new car, that new house, a newer and better paying job, no debt to weigh us down, the means to travel with a healthy nest egg and enough being set aside for retirement. We like our stuff big in this part of the world. And so to dream big about the Kingdom of God, about Heaven, is fair game.

I'll bet most of us have done this. I'll bet lots of you have and I'd imagine that most of things of Heaven like a lavish wedding banquet or a bright, joyful paradise where friends and family greet you. Maybe there are dozens of golf courses, wide fairways, pristine greens, all empty and waiting to be played on nice sunny days. Which is to say every day since it never rains in heaven. There's no shame in dreaming big and yet back in the real world there's the inevitable downer of not having our dreams realized, of our hopes and dreams remaining just that, hopes and dreams and nothing more. All too often our expectation, our anticipation is of something big and exciting happening in our lives. Sometimes it happens and so we simply wait for the **next** big and exciting thing, or nothing at all happens and so we just keep waiting. We spend a lot of time waiting for the next mountaintop experience at the expense of our everyday lives.

The song Beautiful Boy from John Lennon's last album contains the lyric, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." The trouble with that mindset, weekdays are for getting us to weekends, school's only a means of getting us jobs, jobs are for making money to spend on weekends, and to save for retirement, and retirement is about—what?—waiting to die? Geez, I hope not.

So with this in mind, we consider today's reading. Jesus presents us with a scandal today, but we may have glossed over it waiting to get to the good part. For Jesus, the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like a treasure small enough to bury in a field, like a pearl only worth a lowly merchant's wages, like a net that catches fish. For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven seems to be nothing like we've imagined it. Certainly, nothing so glorious. No, for Jesus, the Kingdom of heaven is more like these mundane and trivial objects without the shimmering pearly gates and streets paved with gold, or the great golf courses we imagined. We almost want to ask, "What are you talking about Jesus?" But sorry, Jesus has asked us first. "What are **you** talking about?" You see, Jesus sees through our dreaming, actually beyond it, and addresses us at our deepest insecurities, our anxieties. and our fears. Our fears that are hidden by our dreaming. Our fears about what we're capable or incapable of accomplishing in life, our fears about our futures, our fears about death. The Kingdom God is stripped from our dreaming and replaced with something that we don't like, something that we want to avoid or at the very least something disappointing. And how does Jesus do that—exactly? Jesus names and points to the Kingdom of God right here on earth, right here in the mundane boringness of everyday life. Jesus' examples of the Kingdom of God challenge everything we've been taught. It challenges each incidence where we were asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "What school do you want to go to?" "Where do you want live when you retire?" Jesus' proposal about heaven isn't, we tell ourselves, how we're taught to imagine it.

For one thing, it's way too small. Not only that it challenges our constant future orientation, our looking forward, looking beyond the present, glossing over our displeasure, our dissatisfaction with the here and now. For to imagine a Kingdom of God in the future is to deny that our world, this current "reality", has much—if any—meaning or importance. I mean, let's be honest, this unsatisfying existence is not what our selfish nature desires. And for Jesus to see the Kingdom of God in small, inconsequential things goes hard against our desire for the bigger and better, for always something bigger and better. Yet, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, when Jesus names the Kingdom as something right here right now, it changes and transforms this reality. It becomes something that we don't expect, something we could never anticipate of which we could never dream. It becomes God working among us in the common, the everyday, however imperceptibly.

To see this small thing, this small mustard seed is to see the Kingdom of God at work. What Jesus is getting in this parable initially challenges our dreams of bigger/better for sure. But, almost paradoxically once those dreams are set aside we see that what Jesus is describing is indeed a dream much bigger than we can imagine. It is to see God's Kingdom right here among us here in the midst of the mess that our world seems to have become. Right here in the midst of a pandemic, right here in the midst of protests, right now during all of that and more into life changing life altering experiences. God's Kingdom comes to us in the present. It comes to us where we are as we are. And it comes in forms and ways that we do not expect, in ways that we cannot imagine. On the other hand, maybe we can. Think back to Christmas when we remember that God came to us in the form of a human being, a tiny baby born in a barn to a frightened teenaged girl and her fiancé in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere. That's how God works, in small, unseen things, in strange and mysterious ways. That's how the Kingdom comes, in small seeds, hidden treasures and fishing nets bringing about the fullness of God.

Let anyone with ears listen!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.