

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

(Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

Jesus loved similes.

And I think he loved them with good reason. Similes make it so much easier to take abstract or difficult concepts and put them into language that we understand, or to put murky images into words that allow us to see them vividly.

In writing this sermon, I loved exploring similes written by some of my favorite authors. In *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “The late afternoon sky bloomed in the window for a moment like the blue honey of the Mediterranean.” Arthur Conan Doyle wrote of Sherlock Holmes, “Holmes looked at him thoughtfully like a master chess-player who meditates his crowning move.” And William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* wrote, “Her eyes look like lamps blaring up just before the oil is gone.”

Each of these is an image that may be somewhat abstract or difficult to pin down – the late-afternoon sky, one person looking at another, the appearance of someone’s eyes – but which, when described in certain ways, suddenly come into vivid focus.

This also is true about the similes used by Christ, particularly when trying to take something as large and unknowable as the kingdom of heaven and make it known to his disciples. The listeners of Jesus’ day didn’t always see signs of the kingdom of heaven. They couldn’t see any hope for freedom from the bondage that they experienced at the hands of the Romans and their king. There was no sign of being freed from the shackles of poverty, of having to worry about how they would render unto Caesar all that was required and still having enough to survive.

But as we’ve seen in the Gospel readings the past several weeks, Jesus puts things in the context of images they **would** understand. He compares the grandeur of the kingdom with everyday occurrences and everyday people. Tiny mustard seeds that would be missed as they were mixed in with the seeds of the normal crop, only to surprisingly appear later as a large bush. A treasure that is hidden in a field and when discovered is found to be so valuable that the finder buys the entire field to possess it. Yeast mixed in with leaven and yielding not flatbread but a large and rich loaf.

The kingdom is like all of these: something small that springs into something glorious; something valuable that is revealed after being hidden; something rich that would have before been quite ordinary. But often, what the kingdom is like is lost in the reality of what the world often is.

There’s been a lot going on around us this week. As I watched the news and thought about all that was happening, the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like” continued to come to mind. And as I reflected more on this, I was led to consider not only what the kingdom is like but how there is so much in the world today that is completely unlike the kingdom. The potential for what can be is beautiful; the reality of some of what actually is can be painful.

I'd like to take a minute to share with you the similes – and anti-similes – that I've been thinking about the past few days.

- The kingdom of heaven is like a family that has the means to care for itself and provide care for all members – care of body, care of mind, care of spirit.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like a family that falls through the gap because they earn too much to be considered poor and yet not enough to be labeled “surviving.”
- The kingdom of heaven is like a person with an incredibly busy life who still honors God's call to use what free time they have for the benefit of those in need.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like an institution that looks out for itself and looks to see what it can ***get*** from others, rather than what it can ***give***.
- The kingdom of heaven is like the person who loves all others as brothers and sisters in creation because the others are just as much reflections of the face of God as that person.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like the person who uses the Bible as a justification for hate and discrimination and who hides behind a painful, hurtful interpretation of God's word.
- The kingdom of heaven is like a nation that respects the dignity and worth of ***every*** human being.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like a nation that professes a foundation rooted in God's word but forgets that word when it suits a particular agenda.
- The kingdom of heaven is like the community that welcomes the stranger and cares for the refugee.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like the city that closes its doors and builds walls – walls that may not only keep God out but keep in gifts and love that should be shared with the world.
- The kingdom of heaven is like the person who sees someone drowning and extends a hand of help.
- The kingdom of heaven is ***not*** like the person who sees someone drowning and tosses a stone rather than a lifeline.

So having heard all of this, you're probably wondering what I see that's the good news. As I looked at the world this week, I have to admit that it was originally lost in the blur of everything I was reading and seeing. But in taking time away to pray on this and think about it all, in taking a breath and a step back from the turmoil, I've found the good news.

Despite the anti-similes in the world, I've found a wealth of similes for the kingdom of heaven.

They're all around me.

The kingdom of heaven is like the dedicated volunteers of the food pantry and the summer lunch program. The kingdom of heaven is like the choir and musicians, the altar guild and servers, the greeters and ushers, who bless us each week. The kingdom of heaven is like the hugs and the smiles with which you greet one another and visitors to this sacred space. The kingdom of heaven is like the beauty of this building and the grounds and the countryside. The kingdom of heaven is like the lady who brings her grandchildren over to walk in the churchyard and enjoy the peace in the middle of her week. The kingdom of heaven is like each one of you who come to worship and take these experiences into the world.

In a world full of turmoil and fear among so many, the greatest signs of the kingdom – the greatest similes of what God intends for us all – are right here.

The kingdom of heaven is like nothing we've ever seen – and it's like everything we want to show the world.

In a world where God is hidden, let's show it our mustard seeds, our hidden treasures, our yeast. Let's show the world not the reality of what it is, but the dream of what it can be.

Our dream of what it can be.

God's dream of what it can be.

Amen.