

Sermon Proper 10 Year A 2026 (All Saints); Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Living the Kingdom Life

In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a book called The Homiletical Question, An Introduction to Liturgical Preaching. It's about preaching on the biblical text. The question it asks the preacher to answer is this: "What does the Holy Spirit want the people to hear from these texts on this occasion?" I have tried to discern that this week, and I think what the Spirit is saying is this: "We are to live our lives as if we have already entered the Kingdom of God, as indeed we have." But before living our lives that way, we have to know what exactly Jesus envisions this kingdom to be. If we read the gospels carefully, we will see that this Kingdom of God is radically different and so countercultural from the way the world worked in Jesus' time and continues to work today. Christ Jesus the Messiah was so different from what the people of Israel were waiting for and expecting their Messiah to be. They were looking for someone like King David, a powerful military conqueror who would ride into their midst on a powerful warhorse, and battle and violently defeat whoever the oppressive rulers over their nation were —totally unlike what we will see on that Palm Sunday months from now when the non-violent Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey no less! It was then as it is still today a culture of greed, of violence, of war. And that is not what Jesus was about. He was certainly not the kind of messiah who would violently overthrow the Roman oppressors. Look at his great Sermon on the Mount where he describes what the Kingdom of God is like. Blessed are the poor, he says; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the hungry; blessed are the persecuted. It is a Kingdom of love, love of neighbor, of forgiveness, of welcome for the stranger. He has come so that everyone—yes, everyone—may have abundant life, that they may live healthy and whole in a new culture where violence is no more. This kingdom is about universal love and grace—not about violence and war. No one had ever preached things like this

before. It is important for us to see just how different this Kingdom that Jesus describes is from what the kingdom of the world was then and is still today.

I find that it is easier for me to understand a gospel reading if I put it in the context of what else has been happening in that gospel. Where does it fit in the overall story—the big picture? Today’s reading is from Matthew, so where are we in Matthew’s gospel? One of the Bible translations I use occasionally is The New Jerusalem Bible Reader’s Edition. That translation divides Matthew’s gospel into seven parts. Part I is The Birth and Infancy of Jesus. Part II is when Jesus announces the Kingdom of Heaven in his Sermon on the Mount. The final part, part VII, is the Passion and Resurrection. Our reading today is from Part IV, called The Mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven. Why “mystery?” The word can mean profound, inexplicable, or something that cannot be fully understood. Synonyms for the word “mystery” include enigma, head-scratcher, conundrum, puzzle. Perhaps all of those apply as we read and try to understand Jesus’ description of God’s Kingdom. Let’s try to figure out what Jesus is saying about this kingdom in the gospel today.

The reading today in Chapter 13 is from the Parables Discourse of Jesus. A parable is a form of wisdom speech where the speaker tells a figurative story that uses common and mundane, often earthly phenomena to reveal a spiritual truth. The elements in these stories stand for something else. For instance in the parable of the Sower we read today the seed is considered by most to be the word of God. It is a metaphorical form of speech meant, in the words of C.H. Dodd, to “tease the mind into active thought.” Jesus used parables as his primary way of teaching, and more than forty are included in the synoptic gospels. In this parable there is the sower, the seed, and the soil. In Jesus’ time most farmers did not prepare the soil prior to putting down the seed, and Jesus knew how the seeds the farmers sow often did not take hold and grow produce. He used this story about farming as a metaphor for his own teachings. From personal experience in his own ministry he knew all too well that the seed of his

teaching often fell on rock-laden, thorn-strewn ground. For instance, he had seen his own disciples lose faith during a storm at sea. He saw religious leaders try to choke out his message. And Jesus will soon experience the rocky soil of his hometown as the Nazarenes reject him. And yet, Jesus continues to throw out his seeds—his message—extravagantly wherever he goes. Over the next 15 chapters in Matthew Jesus keeps spreading the word, no matter how dry, rocky, or weed-infested the ground. So, Jesus does not just tell this and other parables. This is his personal experience. He lives it.

Robert Farrar Capon is an episcopal priest and writer who has written three books about the parables of Jesus. One book is The Parables of the Kingdom, in which Capon discusses those parables that reveal what this Kingdom Jesus talks about looks like. That is what most of the parables do. As we have seen this Kingdom is mysterious. It is often puzzling and difficult to understand. Jesus uses parables to explore that mystery. The funny thing about parables, though, is that what his hearers thought they understood would often be a misunderstanding. For instance, mention “messiah” to his listeners and they would see a picture of a king on horseback, not a carpenter dying on a cross; mention “forgiveness” to them and they would start setting up rules about when this forgiveness runs out. Listeners of Jesus’ parables were often confused or mystified or even angry rather than enlightened or informed. He compared the Kingdom of God to things no one ever dreamed of, things like yeast, a mustard seed, buried treasure secured by craftiness, fabulous jewelry purchased by mortgaging everything you owned. And what happens in this Kingdom? Shady people are rewarded, like the tax collector, the Prodigal son, and the Unjust steward; respectable people are scolded, like the Pharisee, the elder brother, and the diligent workers. And in general, everybody’s idea of who ought to be first or last is turned upside down, like at the wedding feast, the Great Judgment, and the narrow door.

By far the largest concentration of parables of the kingdom occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. There are eight in Chapter 13, and the Parable of the Sower takes star billing. Capon says it is “the watershed of the parables,” meaning that it is a turning point in Jesus’ life and ministry. With this parable Jesus begins to describe a Kingdom unlike people would have ever imagined, a paradoxical kingdom, not one of military might or a powerful theocratic state, but one that is all-inclusive, mysterious and incarnational—already present in their midst. Talk about turning things upside down! It is not a kingdom like the one we live in now. There is no violence. There is no war. This begs the questions: How has humanity throughout history missed this, has gotten it so wrong? Why is it that violence and war have been and are still with us? And also, is it possible for humankind to overcome this destructive way of life? The question boils down to this: How are we to live our lives? I think Jesus was trying to provide the answer to that question during his life on earth over 2000 years ago, and is still trying today.

Jim got at this two weeks ago in his sermon when he talked about the anthropologist Rene Gerard and his study of humanity’s tendencies of envy and violence in all civilizations throughout recorded history. It is as if these characteristics are a part of the evolutionary process, as if embedded in our very DNA. Darwin coined this predisposition “survival of the fittest,” in essence that violence as a means of self-preservation is necessary and natural, that self-interest is a virtue. But what follows is the spiral of fear of the other, then hatred, and ultimately killing and war. We see it throughout our history and still today, in the many wars that have and continue to kill millions of people. This human characteristic of envy and violence in the name of self-interest and self-preservation is a destructive and deadly flaw of humanity, and the scale of its barbarity is mind-boggling. Cynthia and I have been watching the World War II documentary on the History Channel, narrated by Tom Hanks. I am amazed at the scope of the destruction and death that occurred during that war. 73 million

people died, on top of the 17 million who were killed just a few decades before in World War I.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There is another way. It is the way that Jesus describes in his often mysterious Kingdom of God. It is the way of empathy and compassion and love, rather than self-interest and envy and violence. It is the way of welcome for the other—of the stranger—rather than exclusion of the other. I saw lots of American flags last Saturday as we celebrated our independence. This is a great and wonderful land, America, truly a gift. But sadly our country like all others throughout was founded through violence and war. We are not a perfect nation, far from it. There is no such thing. Yet as we persevere to become a more perfect union, we must remember that we are called to another way, that is the way of the Kingdom—to love, to welcome the stranger, to stand against the age old disease of violence and war that still infects our world today. I believe it is only by living this Kingdom life that we can stand against the centuries of wrongful self-interest that plagues us still. The world may not change, but we as the people of God—the people of the Gospel—can strive against it as witnesses to this truth: that love is stronger, that only love will survive. The question remains: Can we ourselves live this Kingdom life?

This all brings us back to the parable Jesus tells today, the Parable of the Sower. It is the first parable about the Kingdom, about what that Kingdom is really all about. What we see is a farmer, a sower of seed, a sower who seems to be carelessly and wastefully throwing seed everywhere, onto every kind of ground he encounters: hardened ground, shallow dirt, ground taken over by thorns and weeds, and also good soil. But as we begin to understand the parable, as what Jesus is telling us begins to seep in, we see that the Sower is God, and the seed is the Word of God. By Word of God I don't mean the words of scripture. Rather, this Word is the Logos, the Wisdom of God—lady Wisdom herself. So here in this parable Jesus is showing us how God spreads God's self

into creation, extravagantly and abundantly and without regard as to whether the soil it encounters is good or bad. It is a scattershot approach for sure, but it is an action full of possibility, of hope, of inclusivity, of unconditional love, the foundations of our faith. We can now see both the Sower and the Seed as one and the same, as God emptying God's self into everything, into all of creation, including into all of us. What Jesus is telling us in this parable is that God is present in everything, everywhere, in every conceivable condition, or as he says metaphorically in every possible kind of soil. It is an all-inclusive seed, an all-inclusive love. All we need to do is become that rich soil wherein the seed can grow.