

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“It’s Like...: From All Corners”

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Matthew 13:47-53

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Today is the final week of our series in Christ’s parables in Matthew chapter 13, all focusing on one of Jesus’ favorite topics: the kingdom of heaven. With Advent beginning next week, quick word on what our focus will be throughout the Advent season.

One aspect of Advent that at times can be overlooked is that, as a season, our gaze looks not just back but also forward. It’s a season that, on one hand, looks back at everything leading up to the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago. “Advent,” after all, means “coming” or “arrival.” And for good reason: celebrating the coming of Christ as a child born in Bethlehem. But it also is a season of looking ahead to the second coming of Christ, the second “Advent,” and in that sense it is a season of preparation, of hope, that Christ shall come again, bringing to fulfillment the promises of his ministry and of the Son of Man coming into his kingdom. It’s in that latter sense that we’ll be taking a closer look, going through a part of the Gospel of Mark that, at first glance, can sound a bit out of place in the season, even getting a tad apocalyptic. But ultimately, I think embracing this look expands our view of Christmas not just as a declaration made many years ago, but as a promise and a hope of things to come. We’ll start that next week.

Today, as we wrap up in Matthew chapter 13, Jesus ends this particular bit of teaching by sharing a glimpse of the kingdom that gathers in and sorts out, and in the mix featuring one of the biggest whoppers you can find in the Bible. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Mathew 13:47-53

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

It's an encouraging thread in Scripture that God somehow uses no shortage of unqualified people with no shortage of flaws: the disreputable, the cast out, and at times, even liars and cheats. (Just look at some of the brave things Jacob did in the Book of Genesis, for example.) So there's a healthy track record of people who we might think are way out of bounds.

But up there with Peter denying Jesus three times, this passage contains one of the bigger whoppers of a lie that I can think of in all of Scripture. It's there in v. 51. Jesus, referring to all the parables he's just been teaching, asks his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" And they answer, "Yes." Or at least, I don't buy that for a second. Like a classroom of confused students who just want the teacher to stop talking, they say, "Uh, yes?"

Because, like we've talked about since the beginning of this series, the very purpose of parables, of these stories means to throw one thing alongside another to try to explain the unexplainable, so for them to say, "Oh yeah, the whole 'kingdom of heaven' thing that's impossible to fully comprehend? Yeah, we got it now." I mean, come on.

Even for the parable he just told, one that he even takes a pause to explain directly, I'd have to be convinced they really got that one.

Jesus switches up imagery again to another familiar theme: one of fishing. He says the kingdom of heaven is like "a net that is thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad." This one might be the more appropriate to where Jesus had been teaching from, since as you may or may not remember, Jesus kicked this whole thing off by teaching out of a boat because so many people had gathered.

So even though he had since stepped away to be just with his disciples, the setting was still fitting: a net being cast out, and fish of every kind being drawn in.

The net he was probably talking about wasn't one of those small nets you use to scoop out a fish you've already got on a line. It was one of these huge drag nets, up to a hundred feet wide that sometimes required even multiple boats to spread out and pull in. So the whole notion of pulling in all kinds of fish would make sense with this kind of haul, as would what happens next. They pull the net ashore and then sort the good fish into the baskets and throw out the bad fish. That word for "bad" is actually a bit stronger: more closely means "rotten." Now what a "rotten" fish is doing still swimming around, I don't know, but that's the meaning of it.

Just over a year ago, Frances and I went fly fishing over in North Carolina with some family. My first time and her first time. I don't know what I'm doing, but hey, my sons are with me, so I got to fake it, right? Had a couple of guides with our group showing us the ropes, teaching us how to cast, so it was lines up in the branches and hooks getting caught on clothes and all that.

Long story short, Frances caught a fish bigger than her. I think it was a marlin. I however caught nothing, proving to me that fishing is completely arbitrary and random. But what I wouldn't have given for one of those drag nets to really pull them in.

Because it seems that's part of the point of the parable: it's not a singular fish; it's all sorts of fish; it's a fishing method that's meant to be all-encompassing.

Then Jesus explains the parable, saying that the angels would come and sort out the evil from the righteous—and like we looked at a few weeks back, we've got another “weeping and gnashing of teeth” reference here too.

That's when the disciples lie through their teeth, saying “Yeah, we got all that.” When of course they don't. And neither do we. The truth of the kingdom of heaven being like this net, gathering in all sorts and then all sorts themselves getting sorted is hard for us to understand, or at least it's hard for me to get my head around.

Because at least for me, I feel tempted to zero in on two parts of this parable, but realizing that I do so while neglecting the other.

Part of me wants to zero in on the sorting, of the net being brought to shore and then the fishers putting the good fish into baskets, and throwing out the rotten fish. Jesus explains that that signifies how the angels would sort the evil from the righteous. And when I hear that, I think, “Yeah!” Let's have more of that. More sorting. All those rotten, evil fish, well, they're getting what's coming to them. In fact, let me get in on the action. I can tell you what's righteous and what's rotten. I mean, go ahead and let me do the sorting too. That's what I want to do. Who's with me? You hear the same things I do. Killings in Virginia and Idaho. War in Europe. Deception and fraud in the headlines. There's a lot that's rotten out there, and I know what it is. I know who it is. I know who should get sorted in and sorted out. So more of that please.

That's what part of me wants to zero in on in this parable: the sorting.

But then another part of me wants to zero in on the gathering, on how fish of every kind are gathered together, at how the net draws in without consideration to what kind of fish it is or what kind of lure is being used. It just gathers them all in. And when I hear that, I think, well that's beautiful. Everyone's coming in. Everyone's in the net. There's no niche to be appealed to here, no certain sort. The net is wide, and the draw-in expansive. That's how it should be, so more of that please too.

But what I miss, maybe what we miss, when we focus so much on one or the other, is the good news of this kingdom of heaven.

Maybe when we think so much about who should deserve to get sorted out, the rotten from the righteous, we miss the implication that we are not the ones doing the sorting. What a pitiful world that would be if we could just self-select who gets to enter into God's reign, God's reality.

I mean how silly would it be for one fish being drawn up in a net to lean over to another fish being drawn up too and say, "Hey, you don't belong in here"? And yet in practice, all too often, that's exactly what we do. We place ourselves in the positions of the fishers, the angels on the shore, sorting the rotten from the righteous, casting judgment upon those whom we would deem worthy or not.

And how surprising would it be for us to find out that that which we might consider rotten is in fact what God is drawing into his kingdom?

But maybe we miss just as much when we think so much about the net and how wide it is, of how all sorts of fish are being drawn into it, that we miss the implication that there is indeed a sorting, a reckoning to come. What a disheartening world that would be if we could see out at all the war, hardship, tragedy and not say with hope that one day there will be a reckoning, a day that makes things right, that mends what is broken, that casts out what is evil. It'd be as if none of it even mattered at all, or maybe worst of all, that God ultimately didn't care.

But that's not the kingdom Jesus describes. And ultimately not the kingdom we should believe in. It is neither a kingdom in which we are given the reins of judgment nor a kingdom in which the gathering is meaningless.

It's a kingdom that stretches farther than we could possibly imagine. It draws in those that we couldn't fathom being a part of God's reign, to the point that we would be amazed, lowly fish that we are, as to what other fish are caught up in the net along with us.

But it's also a kingdom into which God speaks a word of grace and righteousness, and one is incomplete without the other. Grace, because the net is cast out wide. And righteousness, because the way of the Lord will not abide evil to endure forever.

How that all will work out is beyond me, but there's hope to be had in this glimpse of a kingdom that simultaneously reaches wide and makes things right. And there's something liberating, I believe, that the reaching and the righting don't start with us.

What are we to do, then? What do we do in response to these glimpses of the kingdom of heaven, of plants growing, of seeds sprouting, of yeast mixing, or treasure finding, and of fish gathering and sorting? Well, Jesus gives us a nudge in that direction too.

He says, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." I love that

calling. It's as if Jesus is saying, when it comes down to it, leave the planting, the mixing, the gathering, and the sorting all to me. That's not your job. The calling that falls to you is instead to bring what we have, what is new and what is old.

So friends, in your seeking of the kingdom of heaven, how could you leave the sorting behind? Who have you sorted out in your own heart as having already been disqualified as rotten? What would happen instead if you left the gathering and the sorting to God, and instead brought in what is new and what is old, and dedicated it to this kingdom that reaches wide and sets things right?

If Jesus' teaching is any glimpse at all, what would happen is that it would bear fruit a hundredfold, grow to be the greatest of trees, be a treasure found of greatest value, and finally a gathered kingdom beyond all imagination.

It's hard for us to understand, and after all, that's kind of the point, but the promise is if we seek it, if we bring what is new and what is old of ours, we begin to see it more and more.

And that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.