



Do You Get It? (The Kingdom?)

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

July 24, 2005

First Baptist Church, Wilson, NC

Those of you who are in school know that some days are just too pretty to be inside for class. On a beautiful day, Jesus took his class outside. He took them through Capernaum and down to the piers at the great lake. And there they sat down and Jesus began to teach with his favorite method, stories. Curious thing about his stories: he seldom spelled out what he was trying to say. He preferred stories that evoked his point, but always left a bit of mystery at the end. So on this beautiful day, he began class with his quirky stories about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom being what life is like when God is boss in your life:

- The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree big enough for the birds to nest...
- The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman put in the flour...
- The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...
- The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls...
- The kingdom of heaven is like a great net thrown into the sea...

So Jesus taught with his quirky stories that didn't tell his students everything, but gave them plenty to ponder. And then he paused, "Have you understood all this? Do you get it?" Do *you* get it? How do you know when you've got it? A clue: if you are shocked and surprised, then you've got it.

One of the most awestruck moments of surprise I ever had was the first time I went to Caswell. I was about twenty years old, visiting there one winter on a biology field trip. I walked out to the water and looked across the Cape Fear River toward Bald Head Island. It was then that I saw a pelican hover over the water, stop in mid air, fold up his wings, and dive into the water. I stared at the water: no pelican. I yelled to no one in particular: Yeowww!! I had never seen a pelican commit suicide before. And then, miracle of miracles, the pelican surfaced, and swallowed the fish he had caught, and casually flew away as if it were the most natural thing. To that pelican it was an ordinary thing. But to me it was an extraordinary shock.

When you are in the kingdom of God, that is, when God rules in your heart, SHOCKING AND SURPRISING THINGS HAPPEN. Ordinary situations have extraordinary outcomes. (Bruce Birch, *Lectionary Homiletics*, June-July 2005, p. 65) A mustard seed is an ordinary, everyday thing. But it will grow into a massive plant millions of times the size of that seed, until it is big enough for birds to nest in it. Yeast is an ordinary, everyday thing, and yet a woman can mix a little yeast with a lot of flour and make enough bread to

feed a village. Tiny things turn into huge things. Sometimes you can see it happening. Sometimes the action is secret and hidden until the miracle of growth is revealed. That's how it is in God's kingdom...

Once a group of young people were debating the best way to spread the gospel throughout the rest of the world. They thought of every way they could: literature, mass media, etc. They were thinking big methods for big results. Then a girl from Africa spoke:

When we want to take Christianity to one of our villages, we don't send them books. We take a Christian family and send them to live in the village and they make the village Christian by living there. *(William Barclay, Commentary on Matthew, vol. 2, p. 77)*

So wherever God rules -- in someone's heart, in a lone Christian family -- tiny things turn into big things.

And wherever God rules, ordinary things turn into extraordinary things. I went to a party last night celebrating the campus ministry of Bob Clyde, who is retiring after 34 years as minister with the Baptist Student Union of ECU. We spent the whole night telling Bob stories. Here is mine, from my year as his intern. At the end of the spring semester, Bob took me dumpster cruising on campus. As students were packing up to go home, we checked out the dumpsters behind the dorms, and found great stuff, because the students would throw away anything that didn't fit in their cars. I was kind of embarrassed about dumpster cruising, until I learned what great stuff you could find. Bob had an especially good eye. He would dive into a dumpster and find some dusty old thing, and hold it in the light and cock his eye at it. And then he would take it home and shine it up, and it became a beautiful vase on top of his table. Standing outside the dumpster watching Bob, it occurred to me that that was exactly what he did with students. A lot of students come to college convinced that they are junk -- worthless, ugly, discarded misfits. But throughout that year I had watched as Bob picked them up from the junk pile, embraced them, and held them up to the light of God's love. And somewhere between the love of Bob and the love of God, those misfits turned into shining, gifted men and women who began to believe that they were valuable in God's sight and had great things to give to this world.

Wherever God rules in the hearts of men and women, amazing and surprising things happen, like a mustard seed that becomes a tree, and like a misfit freshman that becomes a human being, or like yeast and dough that feed a village, and like a Christian family that transforms a village. Ordinary things, extraordinary results. When the powerful grace of God rules in you, amazing growth will happen.

Now let me take this one step further: when the powerful kingdom grace of God rules in you, you will find yourself doing amazing things. After the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, Jesus told two more parables:

The kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

And the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

In the ancient east, there was nothing so lovely as a pearl. People loved to handle them and gaze at them. Jesus was saying that not even the greatest pearl can compare to the experience of having God in charge of your life. Having God rule in your heart is the loveliest thing in the world. To follow God's leadership is not grim and grey duty, it is the greatest and most exciting adventure a person can experience. It is something that you would give anything to have. It is the wise person who will give up everything to know the joy of doing God's will in your life. So when that rule of God comes, we are so excited that we go for broke, we risk all we have, and we sell ourselves out completely for God.

A couple of years ago you may have seen Dennis Quaid in the movie, "The Rookie," which was the story of Jimmy Morris. Jimmy lived in a small town in Texas, where he taught high school science and coached the baseball team. His team had a sorry attitude because they heard a rumor that the school system was going to cut the baseball program. Coach Morris challenged the team to do their best just for the sheer joy of succeeding.

But the players had a challenge for the coach. If we make our goal, then you must promise that you will try for your goal, your lifelong dream of pitching major league ball. So the team won the district playoff, and Coach Morris had to go to tryouts as promised. It was his day to watch the kids, so he took them to tryout. Just as he was changing a diaper, they called him to pitch. He threw a 98 mph fastball, and they offered him a ticket to the minors.

Jimmy Morris and his wife decided that they would risk it. He would quit his job and leave his wife and kids at home to play ball. It was a big risk, but they had so much joy and passion for the game -- the same kind of joy and passion that would move a plowman to use all his savings to buy a field for its hidden treasure, the same kind of joy and passion that would move a merchant to sell all he had to possess one pearl of great price. So Jimmy and his wife risked it all, and lo and behold, Jimmy was called up to pitch for the Devil Rays at Tampa Bay. He pitched in the Big Show for two years.

This past spring, our mission team to the Middle East met some people who had a passion for something bigger than baseball. The people they met in the mission had been oppressed by stultifying cultural and theological rules. But when they heard of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they could feel their religious and social burdens lifting from them, and they risked everything to take hold of the good news. Some of them have lost their families, thrown out from Muslim homes that would not tolerate a Christian in their home. Some of them have lost their jobs, fired by Muslim bosses who would not tolerate a Christian in the workplace. But even in the midst of all that they had given up, they had

no regrets, only the sheer joy of possessing the treasure of the gospel, which liberated them from religious and social oppression from without, which liberated them from sin and death within. And so our team was with them on Easter morning, where one woman apologized, saying, “I’m sorry I’m not my best today. I got no sleep last night because I was so excited that this is my first Easter.”

It is that way in the kingdom of heaven. The grace of God acts on us. We are so overwhelmed that we risk everything to act in response. But there is one more act, the final act of God:

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? (Matthew 13:47-51a)

At Caswell occasionally you can see someone go fishing with a net, a little cone-shaped throw net. They had the same kinds of nets on the Galilee. They called them *amphiblestron*. But they also had bigger nets hundreds of feet long that they dredged the bottom with, just like the shrimp trawlers out of Southport. They called them *sagene* nets.

That’s the image that Jesus was using. God’s judgment will be like a great trawling net that catches everything. And the judgment will be like fishermen sitting on the beach sorting good fish from the bad.

The point is: it matters how you respond to God. It matters that you notice God’s amazing action – what surprising things God can do with you when God is in charge. It matters that you respond and risk all that you have for this.

So Jesus asks: Do you get it?

- Do get the surprise and the joy of God’s amazing action?
- Do you get the passion and the excitement that leads one to become totally sold out for God?
- Do you get it the importance of responding before God’s final action?

Do you get it?

-- Douglas E. Murray