



In a perfect world

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2017

The kingdom of heaven is like... Matthew 13:31

On the eve of All Saints' Day in the year 1517 an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther made his way through the streets of Wittenberg, Germany to the local church where he nailed to the door a list of ninety-five suggestions for the reform of the church he loved. He had become concerned about certain corrupt practices, in particular the sale of indulgences for which you had to pay a fee to receive absolution for your sins. He compiled the list as a way of bringing about a public discourse with no intention of causing division. The reaction to Luther's efforts at reform resulted in his being excommunicated. This meant not only being denied the sacraments of the church, but also being virtually shunned by all the townspeople. Shopkeepers were not allowed to sell him basic necessities and no one was to have anything to do with him. Having been asked to recant his proposals, Luther's response was, "Here I stand; I can do no other." This form of exclusion brings to mind Edward Markham's lines, entitled, *Outwitted*.

*He drew a circle that shut me out.
A heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout,
But Love and I had the wit to win-
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Luther continued to write, translating the Bible into German and encouraged congregational singing of hymns, many of which he composed himself. Because of his indignation over conditions in the church, the Protestant Reformation gathered momentum that brought sweeping reforms. Luther never intended to cause a schism and certainly had no intention of having a separate church denomination named for him.

One of the great principles that came out of the Reformation is the emphasis on confessing our faith through personal testimony. The term *protestant* does not mean being *against*, it means being *for*, giving personal testimony *for* what we believe. It was the personal witness of the reformers who came after Luther that gave rise to a church in which laity and clergy share in the leadership. Luther based his premise on Saint Paul's emphasis in his letter to the Romans that we are saved by our faith. Our salvation does not depend upon any institutional church or its ecclesiastical authority. Neither can we earn our salvation. We are redeemed by the grace of God through our own personal faith in Christ. What resulted from the Reformation is a renewed Christianity.

Jesus spends much of his ministry teaching about the kingdom of heaven, a prototype of what it would be like in a perfect world in which we follow God's will perfectly. This ideal is based on the part of the Lord's Prayer in which we pray that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. While there never has been nor ever will be such a thing as a perfect world, we nevertheless aim for that which reflects God's will as best we can. The more we aim for perfection the closer we are to reach that goal.

Jesus uses a series of images, one right after the other, to describe the kingdom. He taught that the kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed... it is like yeast mixed with flour until it is leavened... like a

treasure hidden in a field...like a merchant in search of a fine pearl of great value...like a catch of fish in which the good is separated out from the bad. These are all images of what the world would be like if we followed God's will perfectly.

The comparison of the kingdom as a mustard seed tells us how great things can come out of small beginnings. When you first plant a tree or shrub, it has the potential to grow large enough to provide shade and attract nesting birds. The possibilities are endless when we begin with an idea that has possibilities of being actualized.

When Jesus uses the imagery of leaven in baking bread, he is describing how it changes the character of bread when it is baked. In the same way, when people reach out to each other, the character of the whole community of faith is transformed and we are given a glimpse of an idealized vision of God's kingdom on earth.

The illustration of the treasure buried in a field tells us the importance of putting all our resources into what is most important. Just as the one who finds the buried treasure is willing to give up everything to find it, we have to be willing to give up selfish worldly ambition to find meaning and wholeness. When we accept the discipline of being a disciple, we give up everything else for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When the kingdom is compared to a pearl of great price, it tells us that God's will is our standard for how we live our lives. It brings light into darkness, joy out of despair and life out of death. There are many great and beautiful things in this world, but being in a right relationship with God brings peace, beginning with our inner most being.

When the kingdom is compared to a fish net it reminds us that both good and bad are gathered together and we have to separate out what is good and useful from what is harmful and useless.

The reality in having the goal of perfection on earth is that we set ourselves up for failure. As imperfect beings we will always fall short of the ideal of perfection. Yet, we continue to hold to the vision of the City of God established here on earth. It is a vision to bring the finite and the infinite closer together to close the gap between the ideal and the actual. Dare to envision a world in which all nations and religions work together for the common good through mutual understanding and respect. This is a world in which there is an end to hunger and poverty and crime. This is a world in which everyone has access to adequate health care and that no one is excluded because of his or her color, gender or sexual orientation. This is a world in which taking up arms is unnecessary to settle differences.

To bring this ideal vision down to our own personal level, there may be times when we feel that we aren't where we thought we would be at this point in life. Marriage, family, work or retirement may not be everything we hoped. We may not be the person we always thought we were or hoped to be. We can't do anything about the past, but we can work on closing the gap between the ideal and the actual.

We find ourselves today in an era of self-indulgence, vulgarity and lacking in compassion and civility. Our mission as Christians is to be the model of what it means to be an authentic, what it means to be fully human. We live and work in an imperfect world surrounded by imperfect people just as Jesus did. The history of the church tells us that the great saints began as fallible beings who grew in faith and character and overcame their faults and failings.

Do not become discouraged when you see how we so easily fall short of the ideal. Keep striving toward the goal, no matter how unattainable it may seem. The English poet Robert Browning expresses this eloquently in his classic lines:

*A man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?*

Robert Browning
Andrea Del Sarto
1855