

Sermon for Zion - April 15, 2018

Hymns: 339 – He’s Got The Whole World In His Hands; In My Life, Lord;
348 - Tell me the stories of Jesus; 335 – Give us, O God, the grace to see;

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-3; 13:10-17; 13:31-35

Sermon Title: Seeing, Hearing, Understanding

Matthew 13:1-3; 13:10-17; 13:31-35 (NIV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables...

Matthew 13:10-17

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

Matthew 13:31-35

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a woman who misplaced a lottery ticket, which ended up winning 50 million dollars. Imagine her joy when, after an exhausting search, she found it!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a person who bought a painting for \$100 at a garage sale, then brought it to the Antiques Road Show, where it was valued at \$500,000!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a little purple thyme flower. It is amongst the smallest flowers, but before you know it, it can fill your whole lawn!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like the Charlottetown Islanders. Everybody expects them to lose, but they keep on winning against supposedly stronger teams!

These are parables – stories of everyday life, which are used to try to understand a spiritual concept. Unlike me, Jesus was a master of telling such stories. He compared everyday scenes to the Kingdom of God, to try to help people grasp deep spiritual truths.

The stories he told were practical and down to earth, and often funny. There's a woman who loses a single coin, and obsessively cleans the whole house from top to bottom until she finds it, and finding it, dances with joy. In Jesus' version, the humour comes from the disproportionate effort expended in finding a single coin, and the wild joy upon its recovery. In my version, it's a lost lottery ticket, worth \$50 million.

That lost \$50 million ticket actually happened to a certain Kathryn Jones from Hamilton, in 2014. There are surprising numbers of similar stories. It will never happen to me, though; I don't buy lottery tickets, considering it a form of gambling. But I still daydream that somebody wins the big one, and for some reason, gives me half! I'm sort of like the fellow who dies and goes to heaven and complains to God that despite praying daily for a win, he never wins the lottery. God replies, "Maybe that's because you never bought a ticket."

Back to the parables: There's a jeweller who sells everything he has, to buy the pearl of his dreams. There's the somewhat shifty fellow who finds a treasure in a farmer's field, hides it again, sells everything to buy the field, and then – surprise! – look what I found!

Then there are the scenes from nature – the way the tiny mustard seed propagates to blanket a whole field with stunning yellow. I've walked through the

very fields close to where Jesus likely told that parable, and let me tell you, it is mustard, mustard everywhere, chest high and more. Or the amazing way, says Jesus, that just a pinch of yeast can work its way through 60 pounds of flour, causing countless loaves to rise. Or the fisherman's wide net that brings up good fish and bad; the good fish are kept, the bad are thrown back. "That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like," says Jesus.

People loved these stories. Matthew, collecting the parables together in Chapter 13 of his Gospel, says that the crowds who gathered to hear Jesus teaching were so large, that he would go offshore in a boat, and use the shoreline as a natural theatre. So popular were they, says Matthew, that "he did not say anything to them without using a parable."

So the people got it. The people loved it! But the disciples didn't. As is often the case in Matthew, they're baffled. "Why do you speak in parables," they asked Jesus. "We don't get it. Please explain it to us." And so Jesus does, to give all of us dim disciples an insight into how a parable works.

Like with the parable of the farmer sowing the seed. Matthew (13:3-9) remembers it like this:

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

A bit later in the chapter, we read this (Matthew 13:36): *Then, leaving the crowds outside, Jesus went into the house. His disciples said, "Please explain to us the story of the weeds in the field."* I love the way Peter, through the Gospel of Mark (4:13-20 NLT), remembers the answer Jesus gives:

Then Jesus said to them, "If you can't understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables? The farmer plants seed by taking God's word to others. The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long."

They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's Word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

“Oh,” say the disciples. “Right. It’s actually simple. When you explain it.”

As are they all. The mustard seed? Just like the Kingdom of God: It starts small – a couple fishermen, a few women, following a dusty teacher through Galilee – and it grows to cover the whole world. Same with the small deeds of kindness we do.

The yeast: like the mustard seed, a small beginning, which soon affects the entire batch – just as when our lives are permeated, changed, transformed by the Gospel.

The lost coin: Like the Kingdom of God, it outwardly appears to others to be of little value, but to the one who is searching persistently and finds it, there is great rejoicing. Some things the world doesn’t value turn out to be the most important of all. And so on. And so on.

So why speak in parables? Why not just say what you meant to say in the first place? Well, remember, Jesus was a great teacher, and these parables stuck in people’s minds. They were funny, and simple to remember, but they also carried a profound point. And since they were taken from everyday life, people recalled those lessons whenever they saw those things again. For instance, I never see a field of yellow mustard without thinking of that parable. Or a field of wheat, with a flock of crows raiding the kernels, and think of the other.

What the parables encourage us to do is to open our eyes to the world around us, and to see the hand of God in it - in nature, in humanity, in the day-to-day circumstances of our lives. The parables teach us to live in awareness – to be aware of the activity of God, to be aware of the signs of God’s Kingdom, in the things we see, in the things we hear, in the everyday events and surroundings of our lives.

Jesus, when the disciples ask him why he bothers with these parables, tells them just that. Listen (Matthew 13:13-16 NIV):

This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

The parables teach us, remind us, encourage us, to open our eyes and our ears to the moments and events of everyday life, and to the presence and activity of God within our experiences and our world.

How can you not believe in miracles, when you need only look around?

How can you not be astonished by the miracle of creation, as winter (slowly, reluctantly) gives way to the glory and new life of Spring?

How can you not believe in the miracle of humanity, as you watch a mother gaze upon the face of her newborn?

There are countless moments in the most seemingly mundane or everyday aspects of our lives in which we can see the fingerprints of God, can hear the whisper of God’s voice, if only we take the time to listen, if only we take the time to see.

For instance: Have you ever had someone just sort of pop into your mind from out of the blue, and felt the urge to call that person, or drop them a line? Most often, we just think to ourselves, “I wonder how they’re doing? I should give them a call,” but we don’t, and then we find out a couple weeks later that it’s too late to ever call them again, and we line up at the funeral home and say to the person beside us, “You know, I thought of them a couple weeks ago, and thought I should call, but never did.” Wasn’t that the voice of God?

Or you heard the first robin of spring, whistling away, and instead of rejoicing that the seasons are turning and life is beginning again, you thought to yourself, “Good luck if you think you’re going to pull a worm out of this snowy frosty ground. I’ll bet that robin is dead in a week.” I made that comment to Dana one year, and she said, “Well, aren’t you a wonderful person to be around.” Hearing something glorious – the first robin of spring – we can either respond positively, or we can further bury ourselves in pessimistic negativity. That’s a parable too.

Sadly, even the tragic event of the Humboldt bus accident can be an eye-opening moment of awareness for us. Let me read a bit of a CBC article for you:

Ryan Straschnitzki, a Humboldt Broncos player who was paralyzed from the chest down in Friday's collision, is pushing through the pain and trying to keep positive.

His neck, back and left clavicle are broken. He can't move any part of his body below his chest and he's not expected to walk again. But he's alive.

"It was pretty devastating seeing my teammates lying there, bloodied and whatnot. My first instinct was to get up and help them, but I couldn't move my legs," he recalled...

Ryan views his survival as a second chance from God, an opportunity to do his part to improve the world in whatever way he can.

Hockey is the obvious answer, he said, adding that he has expressed an interest in continuing his sports career in sledge hockey. Becoming a public speaker is another potential avenue.

Right now, all Ryan is thinking about are his teammates. "We're not alone here. I mean the teammates that we lost, our bond is so strong that we'll always be together."

"Ryan views his survival as a second chance from God, an opportunity to do his part to improve the world in whatever way he can." If Ryan's story doesn't make you stop and be thankful for the people in your life; if it doesn't make you pay more attention while you're driving, and not text and eat and doze while behind the wheel; if it doesn't remind you that we are fragile creatures, that every day is a gift, meant to be lived in love; if it doesn't both humble you and inspire you to do your part to improve the world in whatever way you can; well, like Jesus says, maybe your eyes are open but you don't see; maybe you hear but don't understand. Maybe, God forbid, as Jesus warns - maybe your heart has become calloused. Maybe you no longer feel.

The parables are a reminder to open our eyes, and see. To open our ears, and hear. To open our hearts, and feel. They are a call to live in awareness. To engage with life, with one another, with our world, looking for, listening for, sensing the presence and the leading of God. When we do, we will be more grateful, more generous, more caring, more open, more loving. More alive! We will be living in the awareness of the Kingdom of Heaven; that Kingdom is among us, and among us now.

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. Open our eyes, Lord; open our eyes, our ears, our hearts; make us more aware of one another; make us more aware of you. Amen.