

**“Transformed from Gotcha! To Got It!”**  
**Romans 8:26-39    Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52**

A week ago Saturday evening 40 people from our church participated in the “Take Dad to the Ballgame” event by attending, as a group a Rays baseball game at Tropicana Field. I think that I speak for the whole group when I say that we had a great time. It was a great time because the Rays are doing well this season, and they won that evening due to a solid pitching performance and a grand slam home run by their All Star rookie third baseman Evan Longoria. It was a great night because the stands were full, and there is a contagious enthusiasm about being a part of a large crowd. It was a great night because we were doing things together as a church family, people made calls to work out the riding arrangements, and new friendships were made. I glanced over my shoulder and saw many in our group joining in “the wave” as it passed by and even rockin and rollin to some of the tunes played at high volume. Some might say, “The spirit was present there, and the spirit was contagious.” It feels good to be a part of the winning side and enter into the enthusiasm. You might be aware that the Rays are involved with some negotiations with the City of St Petersburg to build a new stadium, and after enjoying the comfort of Tropicana stadium, I heard the question asked, “Why do they need a new stadium?”

Now I have no desire to enter into that discussion other than to say that the desire to build things bigger and better to draw more and more people in enthusiastic big crowds is actually not a new phenomenon at all. It has been going on a long time. We first read of such a popular project in Genesis. I don’t think they played baseball there, but we are familiar with it as the tower of Babel. Extravagant building projects were a big part of Israel during the time when Jesus lived and taught as well.

The political ruler at the time of Jesus was King Herod. King Herod had been installed in power by the Romans. Palestine was viewed as a backward country. He was given the task of bringing this county up to date by spreading the predominant Hellenistic culture of the day. Herod had great skills as an organizer and builder. One of his great projects was to renovate the Temple in Jerusalem in all of its glory. Make no mistake, he did so, not out of devotion to the worship of Yahweh, but for propaganda purposes. Herod did not just renovate the Temple, he built it bigger and more extravagantly than in any of its previous editions. He knew how to impress.

But his building projects did not stop there. In order to popularize Hellenistic culture he also built a series of amphitheaters across Palestine. None of them were actually covered stadiums, but each of them was huge so that they could seat large and enthusiastic crowds. Of course they didn’t have big jumbotron screens but they were adorned with the most stunning Greek and Roman statuary available. The entertainment offered there was lavish and the most spectacular possible. There were seven of these great amphitheaters in

Palestine and it is remarkable that even today, except for the one that was in Jerusalem you can still visit their architectural ruins.

What is also remarkable, as big and as popular a source of entertainment as they were, there is not one word about them in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> We have no record at all about the entertainment that was offered in those amphitheatres, no scripts, no music, nothing.

Jesus also attracted crowds, but for the most part, he lived and taught in relative obscurity. He never sought attention for himself. There are no ruins of any churches he built. The only words he knew that he wrote down were written by his finger in sand. Even though crowds came to hear him he never outgrew the personal dimension of healing, and he taught mostly with these curious stories called parables.

On their surface they may sound like just nice stories, but both individually and as a whole they are told to “describe by surprise.” What they are describing is the “kingdom of heaven,” and they always use the element of surprise because without being surprised we just won’t get it. What are they describing? This kingdom is not just where we go after we die. This kingdom is about God’s reality in the way we live in this world and in this life. The way Jesus puts it is, “The kingdom of God has come near.” It is right in front of you but it is so obvious that you can’t see it.

Did you hear the surprise in each of the parables that we heard today? They are cleverly entwined in them. First of all in the parable of the mustard seed we often hear this as telling us how the kingdom begins with faith as small as a mustard seed then grows and grows and grows becoming larger and larger and larger and larger, but that isn’t quite accurate. It begins small, yes, but then it grows into a very large shrub. This is not one of the extraordinary cedar trees used in the construction of the Temple. It is a shrub that has grown just large enough for birds to build their nests and call home. In the kingdom of heaven growth is never for the sake of spectacle or amusement. Growth is never just to accommodate our enlarged appetites or inflated egos. Growth is always organic and relational and purposeful. The purpose of the growth of the kingdom is the transformation of the world.

In the parable of the yeast it is helpful to know that in rabbinic tradition that yeast is always associated with fermentation and decay. So for Jesus to use yeast to teach about the kingdom was using a symbol that was much more associated with corruption than righteousness. For example, if in the middle of this sermon I were to use a vulgar and profane word, I don’t care what came before it or what eloquence might follow it, the chances are that word might spread rather quickly, as in, “Did you hear what the preacher said in his sermon today?” That one word would color its influence and would become enlarged to the extent that it would

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<sup>1</sup> Described in [Working the Angles](#) by Eugene Peterson, page 115-116.

take over the entire message. Jesus is saying that the growth of the kingdom of heaven is experienced in just such an expansive way that outdistances our ability to quantify or define it.

The parable of the hidden treasure and the merchant searching for pearls are both about how value is calculated in the kingdom of heaven. If you think about it, neither one of them make sense from an economic, materialistic standpoint.

In the first there is treasure hidden in the field, but someone has first found and then hidden the treasure in the field, and then “in his joy” goes to sell all he has to buy the field. Why buy the field at all? If you find the treasure then why not just keep the treasure and add it what you already have. This appears to be a transaction completed with a mentality intoxicated by joy that has lost sight of a prudent sense of self-interest. This “someone” seems to be so blinded by the delight of this treasure that he has lost sight of the truth of the bottom line. Treasure plus treasure equals more treasure, right? Perhaps economic policy is calculated differently in this kingdom.

Actually, it is calculated differently. We think in terms of private ownership. What is mine is mine, but in the world in which Jesus told this story, ownership didn’t work quite the same way. Legitimacy and integrity were very important virtues. If treasure was found it was rightfully owned by whoever legitimately owned the place where it was found. So it was more than just exuberance that motivated this person to sell all he had to buy the field, it was motivated by a desire to be honestly in possession of this treasure.

In the second there is a merchant who has his trained eyes open searching for fine pearls, notice the plural pearls. That is what merchants do; they search to accumulate. The more they can accumulate, the more they can sell, the more they can sell, the more they can accumulate, and as this process goes on their overall net worth advances and increases. But something different happens in this process of searching that consists of accumulating and selling and evaluating. This merchant finds one pearl of great value, and he sells everything else he has. Now that in and of itself is not that surprising in a merchant’s world for in a merchant’s world, everything has its price, everything is for sale. What is surprising here, even radical is to use all of the proceeds to buy one pearl. What happens then? How does the economic cycle continue? The short answer is that things don’t just continue in the kingdom of heaven. Everything is transformed; everything becomes new.

The last parable says is a fishing parable. It compares the kingdom to a net that is thrown into the sea and is filled up with fish, all kinds of fish. After the fish are caught, eventually there is a sorting out into good and bad, but eventually not immediately. Matthew has a lot to say about patience in sorting out. We talked about that last week in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. It is in Matthew that Jesus talks about the sheep and the goats. It is important to notice that

whenever Jesus talks about sorting things out the message is the same, don't be too quick, let the Lord do the Lord's work. Sorting out is neither your job nor is it mine. We are all called to exercise humility and patience and hospitality. But the surprise in this parable is that the kingdom is not compared to the basket; after all, the parable is very clear; the basket is where all the good fish are. No, the kingdom of heaven is not the basket at all, it is the net, the net where there are all kinds of fish. The surprise is the radical inclusiveness of the image. The kingdom is as indiscriminate as a net dragged through the sea. It brings ashore both the best among us as well as the most notorious of sinners, and it is not our calling to sort out which is which. It is a spiritual discipline for each of us to be honest enough to admit that we are a mixture of the two.

There is not one net for the just and one for the unjust. I don't think anyone ever realized that truth about the kingdom more than the Apostle Paul. In Ephesians he put it this way, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and in all."<sup>2</sup>

This morning, in the passage from Romans that we read this morning it talks about our need to being continually open to being surprised by this kingdom. Paul says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought."<sup>3</sup> That is a remarkably humble admission. If there was ever anyone who fits Jesus description as a "scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven" surely Paul would be it, yet here he clearly says "I don't know how to pray as I ought; I am dependent on the Spirit helping me in ways that are too deep for words." Paul is talking about our ongoing need to be open to the fresh working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

This week I have been finishing up a novel by a woman named Ann Patchett. It has the intriguing title of Patron Saint of Liars. There is one scene where an older, spiritually mature woman is trying find the words to comfort a younger woman. They have both just experienced a loss that was unexpected and brought them both to tears. The older woman reaches out, tenderly cups the face of the younger woman in her hands and through her tears she says, "This is what you are going to have to do: you're going to have to be the one to remind me how God works, how he gives us what we need. You're going to have to be that thing for me and I'm going to be it for you. It is too much for anyone by themselves."<sup>4</sup> The kingdom of heaven grows every time and every way that love is shared and expressed, and it knows no limits and no boundaries.

I subscribe to several periodicals that help with sermon preparation. In one of them I read this quote this week that also expressed the truth of the kingdom of heaven. "It is said that if you take only one step toward God, He advances ten steps toward you. But the complete truth is that God is always with you." The

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:5-6

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:26

<sup>4</sup> Patron Saint of Liars by Ann Patchett, page 303.

parables are telling us the same thing. Is our search for God important, you bet it is, but it is even more true that God is searching for us. Can we find the treasure of the kingdom? That is what Jesus promises, but it is even more true that the kingdom treasure finds us. Any idea where that quote is from? I'm not a student of the Koran but according to this journal that is a quote from the Prophet Mohammed."<sup>5</sup> Now, chances are that you have never heard Mohammed quoted from a pulpit, To tell the truth, I am a bit nervous, because I have never quoted the Prophet before either. I don't have the answers to all the questions

Parables don't answer every question we have, but they may surprise us into asking newer and older questions. For example, how about this question, "How can we ever hope to speak in love or to communicate in love if we do not listen in love as well?"

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

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<sup>5</sup> In Synthesis for July 27, 2008