central
united methodist church monroe

"The Kingdom of God is Like, Part 2"
Matthew 13: 44-52 NRSVUE
Rev. JD Moffett
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44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Treasures New and Old

51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

The Kingdom of God is Like…part 2. Today, unlike last week the Kingdom seems to be a bit drearier. It's a description that ends with "weeping and gnashing of teeth." As you can tell, our series takes a bit of a turn today, but before we get into the "heavy" stuff, another fishing story that's a bit more whimsical.

A young woman was preparing for her wedding. She had spent weeks ironing out the final logistical details, and as she worked on getting her wedding dress on on the big day, she started to think more deeply about the significance of the event before her. So as her mother helped her get zipped up, she decided to take the opportunity to ask for any last tidbits of

profound wisdom. “Mom,” she said, “Can you give me any advice that will help me as this marriage begins?”

The Mom thought for a moment and finally she said, “Yes, I can. Here’s a really important lesson I wished I had learned a little earlier on in my own marriage to your father, it’s this. If you give a man a fish, you can feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, you can get rid of him for a whole weekend!”

This parable, known as the parable of the nets and the fish, is a rather disconcerting parable, isn’t it? This isn’t the kind of thing we want to hear. We want to believe that we’ve got it made and that there is no chance that we might be thrown into a burning furnace, and yet that is the possibility Jesus lays out quite clearly here. As with all parables, Jesus is taking a familiar scene, and using it to say something about the kingdom of God. So, let’s focus for a minute on the familiar situation that Jesus was lifting up in this parable.

Remember that many of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen, and that much of his ministry was done in the area around the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus talked about fish or fishing, the people listening knew what he meant. “Commercial” fishing of the first century, not unlike commercial fishing today, consisted of dropping large nets off the side of a boat, waiting for the nets to fill up, and then hauling them in.

Now, such a fishing technique means that you will not only catch the kind of fish you are fishing for, but probably also some fish you don’t really want. In Jesus’ day, there were primarily three kinds of fish that were in the Sea of Galilee; sardines, a kind of fish that is now called St. Peter’s fish, and a sort of catfish called a barbel.

Among the Jewish people, sardines and St. Peter’s fish were considered kosher, but the barbel was considered an unclean fish. So, every fisherman pulled their nets in and had to sort the fish. The kosher fish, the sardines and St. Peter’s fish, would be put in baskets and kept, but the unclean fish, the barbels, were thrown away. It seems pretty simple, doesn’t it?

Right about now you’re probably thinking, “Yep, just as I suspected. Christ is going to throw out the ‘bad fish.’ So, I need to be sure that I am one of the good fish.” And you’re right, that is certainly an extremely important message of this parable**,** but there is an even more important message that becomes clear when Jesus explains the parable.

When we look back at the previous parables that Jesus tells us we see that the Kingdom is like a mustard seed that can grow and grow as long as we

tend to it and keep it healthy. It's delectable, like a good loaf of bread. The Kingdom is a treasure that is so special that we should be willing to be rid of everything in order to obtain it.

We see these parables are the precursors to the last parable. We must see the Kingdom as the aforementioned parables and realize that that is what Jesus wishes from us as disciples. To be the mustard seed to allow his Kingdom to grow, the yeast to make his Kingdom more delightful and pleasing by being loving to our neighbors and helping the needy, and to show (through our actions) that the Kingdom, and God's love, is the most precious gift on this Earth.

If we can accomplish these goals, we will find ourselves as the "clean fish" in this last parable. It doesn't take much to understand that in order for God's kingdom to be this way. Jesus tells this final parable of the nets and the fish where he says in essence any fish that is unclean, any person that does not embody the kingdom values, is thrown out.

This is where the second half of this parable comes into play. What does Jesus say about those who will do the sorting of the good and the bad in the end? Does he say that fishermen will do that sorting? No. Does he say that the disciples will do the sorting? No. Jesus makes it a point to say that at the end of the age, the angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous, the good from the bad. In other words, God alone is the arbiter of good and evil, not us.

He is the judge; we are to be but only the witness and testify his great love and sacrifice that allows us to obtain grace and forgiveness. Now that's kind of a hard message for Christians to hear, isn't it? Or maybe it's just a hard message for people to hear, period. Because we like to be in control, we like to be the holders of all knowledge and the deciders of all decisions.

It's why we love remote controls and buffet lines. We like to make the decisions, we like to have total control; and here Jesus is saying in essence, "This one isn't yours to control." This message is one of the messages that Jesus gives that really makes it hard for us to listen. We like to decide what is "moral" and "immoral" when in fact that is up to God to decide. We draw lines based on denomination, or how someone was baptized, or which version of the Bible is the "official," "correct" version, or what kind of music is best and on and on and on.

There's a story of a woman who died and she went up to heaven. Of course, when the woman arrived at the Pearly Gates, she was greeted by St. Peter. St. Peter opened up his books, checked the records and found that indeed this woman had a place in heaven. So, St. Peter opened the gates and

escorted the woman inside toward her place in paradise. As the pair walked along, the woman noticed many doors all around them, and she was surprised when all of a sudden at one point, St. Peter turned around and hushed her. Once they had passed the area and St. Peter indicated to her that it was okay to speak again, the woman asked, "St. Peter, why did we have to be quiet back there?" St. Peter looked at the woman and said very matter-of-factly, "Well, that back there was the room full of people who think they are the only ones in heaven!"

Sometimes we don't like to think that we might have to share the Kingdom of God with people who are different from us, or people who don't agree with us, or those we don't much care for. *We* draw lines and try to be the sorters because we want to be able to cast judgment on people who are different from us. *We* want to be able to say that we are the ones who are right. *We* want to know that the people we don't like will get what's coming to them.

Besides, it's a lot easier to call down fire from heaven on your enemies than to love them. But you see the problem…I just said "we" a lot…in this parable there is no us, only God and his angels…let's remember that when we go out in our lives this week. *We* should be acting not like Jimmy down the street or Carol across town or even ourselves as judges, but instead act as if though God is the judge (which he is) and he happens to always be with us so, we should act accordingly

Our only concern should be to be good fish. Our task is not to try and take control of a situation that is not ours to control, but instead to allow God's grace to take root and to realize that the response of others is their responsibility, never, ever ours. You know, whenever we go fishing, we choose our bait and throw our line in the water, but whatever happens after is beyond our control. We can't decide that a good-sized fish is going to bite our line and we'll be frying up filets for dinner.

What happens at the other end of that line is not up to us, and the same is true in the kingdom of God. Jesus' message in this parable is clear; don't worry about everyone else, just be a good fish. You can't control who's in and who's out; you can't control who likes you, nor who follows God in Christ Jesus. The best we can do is to love our neighbors and love our enemies, and then we have to let God sort the rest out. The Kingdom of God is a magnificent place that we all strive to get to, but we must remember the Kingdom here on Earth as well. We must make his Kingdom here be a place of love, compassion, and forgiveness

We must tend to it and let it grow, we must be the yeast that makes the bread so good, we must allow ourselves to be rid of Earthly possessions in order to obtain the amazing value that is the Kingdom, and we must

remember to be a good fish. When we read, listen, and choose to follow these parables, and begin to understand what Jesus was saying was that The Kingdom is a great place to be, and in order to get there we must be caring, loving, willing to sacrifice, forgiving, and compassionate. If we can live our lives as great as it is in the Kingdom of God, we will find ourselves to be the good fish when the time comes.

So, let’s be good fish this week, let’s remember that God is the judge, not us. We do not decide what is right and what is wrong…that is God's job. Our job is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. When we do these things, we will find ourselves in the Kingdom of Heaven, and that sounds like an amazing place to be! Amen.