Genesis 29:15-28

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

 The story is told of a man from India who traveled to England to visit a friend. He told the friend that he wanted to see Oxford University. So the friend took him to campus and pointed out the library, the lecture halls and student quarters. At the end of the tour the visitor was puzzled and told his friend, “I see the library and other buildings but I don’t see Oxford University.”

 Philosophers love this story. They use it to point out perceptual issues. How do we perceive things? How do we make sense of – and understand – the world around us? I think Jesus would have loved this story, too.

 Today, we have Jesus teaching a group of ordinary folk. Bear in mind these are very religious people, at least in the sense that there was no escaping their religion. It wasn’t *in* their culture; it *was* their culture. It was built into the rhythm of their lives. They went to Jerusalem several times a year for sacred festivals. They attended synagogue. They observed Sabbath rituals every week of a family meal and a day of rest.

 All but the most perceptive and intuitive could have been like the man from India: I see the library and other buildings but where is Oxford? I see religion everywhere but where is the kingdom of heaven? It’s a great question!

 Jesus is a little bit divided on the issue. In some places, he refers to heaven as an other-worldly dimension. He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” [Matthew 6:19]. In another instance, he refers to it as a mystical, inner dimension when he says, “The kingdom of God is within (or among) you.” [Luke 17:20]

 Jesus is anything but other-worldly or mystical in today’s reading. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a valuable pearl and a fishing net. The kingdom of heaven is like seed, yeast, treasures both hidden and obvious, and a net.

These comparisons open our imagination and invite our curiosity. Which image resonates with you? If you bake bread as I do, you know something about yeast. If you love fishing the rivers and lakes of Colorado, then pulling fish out of the water resonates with you. Whichever image is most tangible for you, that is your portal into greater understanding about how the world works and how best to perceive it.

 For example, the mustard seed and yeast are about abundance. Each thing is tiny but has powerful effects. We readily acknowledge this but we don’t tend to believe it about ourselves. We say, “I’m only one person. What difference can I make?” I confess: I have said this myself. Or maybe it sounds like this: “We’re just a little pizza shop.” That’s what Mason Wartman says whenever he’s asked to explain how his tiny restaurant in Philadelphia provides 50-to-100 meals a day to homeless people.

It started in 2014, soon after Wartman opened Rosa’s Fresh Pizza. He had been working on Wall Street but longed to go into business for himself. The concept of a-buck-a-slice pizza there in New York fascinated him, so he brought the concept home, to Philadelphia. Soon after opening, a customer wanted to buy a slice for someone in need. Pay it forward. Wartman put a sticky note on the wall to remind himself that a free slice of pizza was available for anyone who was hungry and broke.

In the first nine months of operation, customers bought 8,400 slices of pizza for their homeless neighbors. Today, Post-it notes cover the walls of the restaurant. A website gives testimonials from homeless people whose lives started to turn around after being treated decently by the staff and customers of Rosa’s. Wartman has even hired some of those who were homeless to work in the restaurant.

Who would have imagined that “just a little pizza shop” could make such a difference? Such abundance. Such goodness. All while operating a business, paying vendors and making payroll. Wartman’s outfit is not a social agency. But it is leaven. This is the kingdom of heaven: people caring. Creating abundance from insignificance. The leavening power of yeast or the explosive potential in a seed to grow are really kind of miraculous when you think about it. The kingdom of heaven is the “miraculous everyday.”

When we hear these parables, we typically put ourselves in them. Which is good. We can see ourselves planting seeds or baking bread. But what about the other images from today: the treasures? The one buried in a field and the pearl of great price? I can’t relate to these! I’ve never found buried treasure. I’ve never even seen a real, uncultured pearl.

So what if we take ourselves out of the story and put in God?

Maybe God is the one who finds a hidden treasure. Maybe God is the merchant who found a pearl of great price. What are these treasures? They are us and they are us as part of Creation. God is all-in for Creation; all-in for us and having relationship with us. We are products of Creation who have been fashioned in the very image of the Divine. God is willing to risk everything for us – to sell everything for us, so to speak, even to the point of becoming one of us. The incarnation is a significant price for God to pay to be with us.

This way of perceiving the world invites a new question. Not, “Where is Oxford? Where is the kingdom of heaven?” But: “What is the Church willing to do as its work of the Gospel?” How far is the body of Christ willing to go to serve, preserve, enhance the treasure and the pearl which God loves? Creation. All of it. Humankind. All of us.

It is all of us that the fisherman’s net brings to shore. “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 and put the good into baskets and threw away the bad.”

So, yeah, the kingdom of heaven has people in it who are good and people who are bad. If it didn’t, it wouldn’t have any people at all! But let’s not be so swift to pronounce judgment.

You have probably heard this story. It is an ancient Chinese proverb that illustrates yin and yang. These are opposites that cannot exist without each other. Like shadow and light. Expanding and contracting. Where good and bad are concerned, this proverb teaches that it takes a long, long time to determine which is which:

A farmer and his son had a beloved stallion who helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away. The neighbors had pity. “Your horse ran away, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading a few wild mares back with him. The neighbors rejoiced! “Your stallion has returned, and brought several horses with him. What great luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

Later that week, the farmer’s son was trying to break one of the mares. She threw him and he broke his leg. Once again the neighbors had pity. “Your son broke his leg, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

A few weeks later, soldiers marched through town, recruiting all able-bodied boys for the army. They did not take the farmer’s son, as he has a broken leg. Once again the neighbors rejoiced! “Your boy is spared, what tremendous luck!” To which the farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

The proverb teaches that only time will tell the whole story. No one lives long enough to find out the “whole story.” In the meantime, we’re all in the heavenly net – good and bad. No one is excluded. We are all seeds that grow – whether in love and sacrifice or in greed and selfishness. We are all leaven – whether to pay it forward so that others can be blessed or to further some dark scheme. And all the while, we are treasures of God and treasured by God. Amen.