

“God’s Kingdom Is Like....”

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Truly, I admire all our parents who have raised or are raising children, including pets. As a parent, I would confess that parenting is a blessing and challenge. It is never easy to be a good parent. Of course, it requires us to have a loving heart and patience. And sometimes we need gifts of self-control and persistence for ourselves. Actually, I want to share with you my feelings and interaction with my son, Jacob. My son, Jacob is going to be three in November. Every day, we discover new things about him and his favorite things too. Recently, we found that he likes fish. We took him to a pet store and bought him some gold fish. We bought twenty-four little gold fish for only two bucks. We were so proud of our caring hearts for him. He also seemed to be very excited! We set up the fish tank pouring water and some sand on the bottom of the tank so that Jacob could fully enjoy watching fish at a close distance. And then, I went back to work at my home office. About an hour later, I felt it was too quiet in the living room. So I went back there and I found that there was a big mess. Jacob smiled smugly at me sitting on the coffee table. Sand was dug out and spread over the carpet and the carpet was fully wet. Needless to say, his clothes were wet, too. I yelled at him to go to the coffee table and clean up the mess. Inside the 10 gallon tank was a butterfly net with four dead innocent fish. It was massacre.

Little fish in a tank must have been an attractive world for a baby. Probably, Jacob wanted to play with them. It was quite frustrating to his parents. I shared this story with my mother. She discouraged me from scolding Jacob, because she said that I did exactly the same thing at my father’s elementary school when I was a little older than my baby Jacob. After cleaning up, Youngjae and I moved the tank to a safer place. Jacob's observing the fish's world made me think about our faith between God and us and God’s world and our world. ***How does God intervene in our world or how does God interact with us?***

Let's explore some perspectives on this matter. First is Atheism. Atheism is simply the absence of belief that God exists. Secondly, it is Gnosticism in the time of early Christianity around 1st and 2nd century in the Greek world. This belief emphasizes souls as the perfection of God’s world, but our body is nothing. It is a jail of “the soul”. Our physical world is not part of God’s world. Thirdly, there was a belief of Deism in the 18th century, especially during the French Enlightenment. Deism is the belief that God exists, but God doesn’t

intervene nor interact with our world. The human reason and nature are sufficient to run this world. Deism rejects God's revelation in our world. Voltaire, the philosopher explained this view metaphorically using the concept of God as a watchmaker. He manifests order in the universe which entails an intelligent creator watching his creation as carefully as a watchmaker oversees his work. But Judaism and Christianity reject these understandings of God. Our God is not entirely transcendent neither separate from the world. God is here in our world with us and works with us. We believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Old Testament and we, Christians also believe that Jesus teaches us God's kingdom is happening in our daily lives. In our Christian faith and in Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of heaven is not a resting place after our life, but any place and situation where God's reign is happening here and now.

Let us revisit Jesus' teaching and understanding about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God was an essential component of Jesus' public ministry. In our Scripture reading, Jesus introduces us to new images of the Kingdom of God. He talks about a new perspective on God's kingdom. It is quite different from our expectation or imagination. We imagine a very special place where there is no pain, suffering nor weakness and vulnerability, but only eternal happiness and pleasure. Jesus describes God's kingdom using the environment around him such as the mustard seed, yeast and flour. What do these images tell us is the secret of God's kingdom?

Let me share each element with their importance in Jesus' context. A mustard seed is small, but it is not the smallest of all the seeds. The point of this metaphor symbolizes weak, minority and humble people in the time of Jesus. It meant those who were seeking God, but those who were not allowed to be a part of God's holy children. They were women, disciples, Gentiles, sick and hungry people around Jesus. Do you know that mustard doesn't grow as a tree, but it is a garden herb or a plant? It sometimes is regarded as a weed, but it grows faster than any other plants and spreads over everything in a short time. The mustard seed represents how Jesus showed his compassionate heart to the weak, the vulnerable and suffering people. He blessed them saying that God's kingdom is happening among them.

In verse 33, we find another surprising image of God's heaven. The God-figure is a woman. She mixed yeast with three gallons of flour to make over 100 pounds of bread. Notice that in Jesus time, the image of the leaven or yeast was often compared to corruption. But here, Jesus intentionally used this symbol to celebrate diversity for "declaration of inclusion". Jesus wasn't interested in being "purest of the pure." He wanted to embrace all people as people of God. In Jesus' vision, God's kingdom is not one race oriented or dominant group, but rather diverse backgrounds, races and cultures coming

together as brothers and sisters celebrating ourselves as children of God. For this work, Jesus dedicated his entire life through suffering and death.

The Kingdom of heaven is any place and any moment where God's reign is happening in our daily lives. God's reign means our ministry movement of compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, authenticity, reconciliation and peace beyond our prejudice and self-interest. We reach out to people heart to heart and to our neighbors as well. The purposes of church ministries are not task-oriented gatherings, but God- experience gatherings. People come and experience God and God's kingdom through authentic sharing. Look at our church ministries like book club, outreach ministries, SWAG and other small group gatherings. We share vulnerable hearts and pray for each other. When someone courageously shares his or her vulnerable heart, when we carefully and fully listen, and accept each person, the kingdom of heaven is happening right there. In my experience as your pastor, I have witnessed many glimpses of the kingdom of God here. I hope that our Fair Oaks United Methodist Church continues to be a place for reaching God's kingdom. Amen.