



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

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Finding the Kingdom
Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 13:10-17, 31-35

Glide is quite an experience! Once called Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, the San Francisco congregation now known simply as Glide describes itself as “a radically inclusive, just and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization.”¹ Worship at Glide is for everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, without any questions or judgments, without any dress code or doctrinal test. And worship at Glide includes a lot of hugging, hand clapping and dancing.

When the group of Lakeside pilgrims attended worship at Glide two Sundays ago, I saw a sign in the hallway which seems to sum up Glide’s theological emphasis: “God loves all the children of the world—No exceptions.”

But as free and open as Glide may be in its radical inclusivity, membership at Glide is not necessarily easy. We learned that Glide has an annual ministry budget of over \$18 million. With only four ministerial staff and a facility that, while large is far less than opulent, the vast majority of that budget is directed to the ninety-two social ministries supported by Glide. From feeding programs to tutoring programs, from a homeless shelter to a free medical clinic to a free legal clinic, Glide provides for the spiritual as well as physical needs of anyone who enters their doors. And Glide’s members are asked to respond with their financial resources as well as their time and talents. Even in the middle of the worship service we attended, someone came to the microphone with an impromptu announcement that volunteers were needed immediately to fill food bags that would be distributed for lunch that day. In response, several Glide members got up from their seats and headed for the kitchen.

There have surely been many criticisms about the theological, political and social positions taken at Glide. Their teachings and practices have often been outside the mainstream and are baffling, even offensive, to many

¹www.glide.org

Christians, but the people of Glide are surely doing their part to live out their understanding of the radical nature of God's love and mercy for all people.

Jesus' first hearers were often baffled and critical, too. The Roman authorities, Jewish leaders, the crowds who gathered, even his own disciples saw his miracles and heard his parables and teachings, but they didn't quite know what to make of them. The Roman Empire allowed citizens to continue their own diverse religious practices because it was a way for them to placate various provincial groups and maintain control, but Jesus drew large crowds everywhere he went and drew the attention of government officials when he began talking about establishing a new kingdom.

God had tried before, speaking through Hebrew prophets like Amos, to tell his people that he had a vision of a new kingdom, one where justice and righteousness, not military power or religious ritual would reign. The Jews had been waiting for centuries for their Messiah to arrive and establish this new kingdom, but they were looking for a military leader to rescue them from the oppressive Roman occupation and restore Israel to its former glory. Instead, this Jesus came instructing them to love their enemies, to treat even sinners and outcasts as equals, and to be like the little children among them.

The crowds of people who followed Jesus from one town to another witnessed his miracles and found inspiration in his words. They came to him for instruction and blessing and healing, often asking him to interpret the Law or touch their broken bodies or offer a word of hope. But they, too, became confused and disenchanted when he talked of turning the other cheek, taking up crosses and losing their lives in order to gain them.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus surprising everyone with his teachings. From the moment Jesus emerged from his forty-day wilderness journey and sat down to deliver what we know as The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began turning conventional interpretations of the Law upside down and challenging his hearers to a radical new way of understanding God's kingdom.

His words in today's Gospel Lesson from Matthew 13 are no different. As Jesus traveled from village to village, healing and teaching, he had gained quite a reputation as a storyteller, often illustrating his message with parables that were beautifully crafted but difficult to understand. Finally, after he had delivered yet another parable of which they could not make sense, his disciples came to him to question his pedagogical methods. "Why do you

speak to them in parables?” they asked (Matthew 13:10). It is likely that they were asking for themselves as much as for the sake of the gathered crowds.

And Jesus’ answer must have baffled them further, “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’”² Jesus told them that he taught in parables precisely so that some people *wouldn’t* understand, so that the mysteries of the kingdom would only be revealed to those whose hearts were open and ready to receive them. He goes on to tell his disciples that what is being revealed among them are things that many prophets and righteous people before them have longed to see and hear. This motley band of common folk like fishermen and tax collectors are receiving the secrets to God’s kingdom that have been previously withheld even from prophets, priests and kings. Talk about turning what is expected completely upside down!

Last Sunday morning, Leon Henderson led the Discussion Class in a thought- provoking discussion of what heaven is like. We looked at what we know based on what Scripture tells us, what tradition has suggested but we cannot know for sure, and even ideas that we have borrowed from other traditions and incorporated into our own. In the end, we decided that what we don’t yet know far outweighs what we can prove, and that whatever our experience of heaven will be like, being in the full and eternal presence of God will be joy beyond our comprehension.

What I now realize, of course, is that we should have just read Jesus’ parables from Matthew 13, and all our questions would have been answered, right? I mean, in this chapter alone, Jesus tells six parables which begin with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like”

The kingdom of heaven like someone who sowed good seed in his field, and like a mustard seed, and like yeast, and a treasure hidden in a field, and a merchant in search of fine pearls, and a net that was thrown into the sea and caught every kind of fish.

Oh, thanks, Jesus. That clears it right up. Huh?

I think what’s really going on here, as is so often the case in the Gospels, is that, just as we attempted to do in Sunday School last week,

²Matthew 13:13, NRSV

those who are following Jesus want answers to questions that are unknowable to us. With our limited language, how can we describe something that is indescribable? With our limited imaginations, how can we envision something that is unimaginable? With our imperfections, how can we begin to experience something that is perfect?

Jesus could very well have said, "You can't begin to understand, so don't even try. Since heaven is off in the sweet by and by, just trust me that it will be great!" Yet, by telling parables to speak of such mysteries, Jesus begins to paint a picture of God's kingdom which is not meant to be off in some far and distant future but which is being fulfilled in their hearing and seeing!

Jesus doesn't describe God's kingdom as some lavish city with streets of gold and gates of pearl. Those images would come much later in Christian thought when John would be given a vision of the last days. Instead, Jesus tells his followers that God's kingdom which has begun to be realized and experienced even now is one which takes root and grows despite malicious efforts to try to choke it out, one that flourishes even from the tiniest of seeds, one which works to produce nourishment just as yeast leavens flour, one that is a treasure of such great value that anyone who finds it will rejoice and be willing to sacrifice greatly for the sake of it, and one which casts a wide enough net to bring us all in.

Too often, in our limited vision, we want to define things that defy definition, to understand things that are unknowable, in hopes that our efforts will give us a greater sense of control. Mystery doesn't often sit well with us, and we would feel much better if we just had all the answers, if everything were just laid out in black and white. So we create systems and rules and structures to try to contain life and all its mysteries and even God himself in little compartments that make us think we have everything under control and everything figured out.

But then Jesus comes along and says that he teaches the truths of God's kingdom in parables so that we *can't* figure it all out. Instead of giving a definition, he tells a story. Instead of drawing lines to construct a kingdom that fits our notions of success and power, of what is proper and acceptable, he broadens the margins and colors outside the lines to help us envision a kingdom where God's grace extends to all of humanity, indeed to all of creation, where the possibilities for life and joy and redemption are beyond our wildest imagination.

One of the visits in San Francisco to which I had most looked forward was to the Hindu Temple. When we visited the Temple six years ago, our group had formed an instant connection with one of the nuns there named Ananta Prana, and she and I had kept up an e-mail correspondence for many months after that visit. When this year's group picked San Francisco as our destination, I had quickly e-mailed Ananta to let her know we were coming back, and she had responded enthusiastically. It was wonderful to have a chance to visit this warm, engaging, hospitable friend again.

As we had done in 2006, we spent time in the worship space at the Temple, with Ananta explaining the various images on their altar and describing their beliefs and worship practices. After the initial information session, she invited us to walk through the beautiful terraced flower garden but instructed us that, since the flowers were grown for the purpose of offering them on the altar, we would not be allowed to pick the flowers or to bend down to smell them, thereby seizing some of the fragrance meant as an offering to God. To those of us who display flowers for the purpose of adding beauty to our worship space but do not make food or drink or fragrant sacrifices at an altar, this seemed a strange request, but, of course, out of respect for her beliefs, we complied. And since the same instruction had been given at our previous visit, I had expected it.

What I did not remember or expect, however, was that when I walked out into the edge of the garden, the sweet scent of the flowers surrounded me. Almost immediately I thought how very much like us religious folk of every tradition to make rules to try to contain God and his gifts to us, and how very much like God to offer his blessings and his grace to us so generously, often in spite of ourselves. I couldn't help but smile with the thought that, as God so often does, he had turned our religious definitions and limitations upside down. The pleasing fragrance of the flowers met me, through no effort or intention of my own, just as the gracious gifts of God so often do.

Today we will gather at the Lord's table to receive the gracious gifts of God once more. Many great theologians have written volumes in an attempt to explain the meaning and purpose of this table, and different traditions and denominations have developed detailed descriptions of how they understand what happens here. Those explanations and understandings are not unimportant, but if we allow ourselves to become so bogged down in trying to define these elements and what they mean, we may miss the chance to rest in the mystery of God's presence here. We may miss the astounding gift of hospitality and acceptance extended to us as children of God. We may miss

entirely the opportunity to experience the grace that God offers as these simplest of elements become powerful symbols of all that Christ accomplished through his life and death and resurrection.

The kingdom of heaven cannot be bound by our assumptions or definitions or limitations. Unlike our restrained expressions and confined ideas, God's kingdom is radically inclusive, beautifully mysterious, astoundingly unpredictable, graciously liberating. The kingdom of heaven is like the sweet fragrance of flowers which reminds us that God's grace pursues us and his gifts are abundant. The kingdom of heaven is like a feast where all are invited to dine, not just as guests, but as beloved children of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.

We gather in this place week by week seeking your presence, O Lord, and often searching for answers, for community, for comfort, and for peace. We are called to a life of faith and discipleship, but sometimes your call implies more than we bargained for. The world would measure success and happiness by quantity: what is the biggest, the most, the best; and convince us that we can be masters of our own destiny. But Christ has called his followers to life in a kingdom whose economy is measured by obedience and joy and compassion. Where the world tells us to do whatever we must to remain in control and get ahead, Jesus teaches that the last will be first, that the greatest faith grows from the tiniest of seeds, that true power is found in vulnerability, that those willing to give the most will, in turn, gain the whole world. O God, grant us the grace to hear your call above the flattery and deception of other messages that beckon to us, and give us the courage to follow you instead of chasing after attractions and accolades that are temporary. Make us attentive to the sound of your voice. Grant us wisdom to discern your truth. Give us endurance and creativity to work toward the vision of your kingdom.

We have only to look around us, O Lord, throughout this community and around our world, to see the needs that surround and sometimes overwhelm us. Images on the evening news are stark reminders of places where violence and corruption and oppression threaten to rob your children of life and security and freedom. We pray that you would make of us messengers of your peace. Even in our land where opportunities are available and resources are abundant, there are dark corners where poverty and hopelessness seem to reign. We pray that you would grant us generous and compassionate hearts in the face of such need. Among our own number there are many who are plagued by illness, crippled by grief or haunted by fear. We pray that you would empower us to bring healing and offer comfort. Within our own circle of friends and family, there are needs of body, mind and spirit which we want to meet but which leave us feeling depleted and helpless. We pray that you would enable us to offer words of hope and to share your love and mercy in ways that will bring assurance to these for whom we pray that they are not alone in their struggle. Grant to each of us, O Lord, grace for this day and hope for all our days to come. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Elizabeth Edwards
Associate Minister