

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 30, 2017

“What Is Heaven Like?”

Matthew 13:31-35, 44-46

I believe that we human beings have a perception problem. We often think we have the proper perspective on an issue when in fact we're way off.

There's a charming story that Thomas Wheeler, one time, CEO of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company (a.k.a. MassMutual), tells on himself. He and his wife were driving along an interstate highway when he noticed that their car was low on gas. Wheeler got off the highway at the next exit and soon found a gas station with just one gas pump. He asked the lone attendant to fill the tank and check the oil, then went for a little walk around the station to stretch his legs. As he was returning to the car, he noticed that the attendant and his wife were engaged in an animated conversation. The conversation stopped as he paid the attendant. But as he was getting back into the car, he saw the attendant wave and heard him say, "It was great talking to you."

As they drove out of the station, Wheeler asked his wife if she knew the man. She readily admitted she did. They had gone to high school together and had dated steadily for about a year. "Boy, were you lucky that I came along," bragged Wheeler. "If you had married him, you'd be the wife of a gas station attendant instead the wife of a chief executive officer." "My Dear," replied his wife, "If I had married him, he'd be the chief executive officer and you'd be the gas station attendant."

Yes, we often think we have the proper perspective on an issue when in fact we are way off. Jesus understood this tendency for us humans to get it wrong. Especially when it comes to spiritual things. So, he told a few parables. He said the kingdom of heaven is like: Read Matthew 13:31-35, 44-46,

A small seed. A mustard seed to be precise. Why did Jesus choose such a small item to represent something so large in heaven? He did this because even though the Kingdom of Heaven is enormous we often are blind to its presence. Do you hear the irony in Jesus' words? The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. If you have ever seen a mustard seed then you know what a ridiculous statement this is. They are as small as a grain of sand. You can literally hold thousands of them comfortably in the palm of your hand. Yet it grows into a very large bush. Large enough for birds to build their nests among its branches. What is Jesus saying? He is saying, "God is at work, even though our human eyes often fail to perceive what is happening.

As Christians, we understand that some things don't make sense, but we live in a society where the motto is, "the bigger, the better." We have gone beyond big churches to mega-churches. We are overwhelmed with and bedazzled by huge social problems such as world hunger and children in crisis. As a result, we overlook the tiny seeds.

It's the little things. Tiny viruses the size of a pinhead, heart valves no larger than a person's thumb nail, single votes in an election, an ill-chosen word from a loved-one – little things have tremendous power. Matthew 13 records the story Jesus told about the smallest thing his audience could identify with – a mustard seed. We should not underestimate the impact of little things.

Sometimes it takes just a little bit of patience to work with people. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of love to redeem a situation. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of grace to bring about healing. Sometimes it takes just a little bit of understanding to save a friendship.

Let me tell you that when God moved in history for the salvation of his creation, he did not do so with a legion of angels, or some grand computer, or some meeting of all the principalities on earth. He did so with a seed planted in the womb of a peasant girl, named Mary. That seed would grow one day to full life and change the world and die for your sins and mine.

Yes, we often think we have the proper perspective on an issue when in fact, we are way off. Things that don't make sense have real influence. And that, Jesus said, is what heaven is like.

Then Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. I have always been cautious when interpreting the Bible, as everyone should be. Unfortunately, there are some who are not. Some sincere souls, to their own destruction, mangle in their minds the meaning of the scriptures. Confusion leads them to misrepresent Jesus, Paul, Moses, and all the other teachers and authors of the Bible. A simple example is the text before us.

Jesus has said elsewhere that it is difficult if not impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. But here he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. In other words, the kingdom is like a lot of loot stashed away somewhere. The difference in these two teachings is this: in one he's talking about the rich and in the other he's talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. The criticism of the rich is a direct statement of fact. The illustration

about the kingdom being a hidden treasure is a simile. It's a figure of speech using the word 'like'. The Kingdom of Heaven is LIKE a hidden treasure is 'poetry.'

This is why I get frustrated when I hear Christians say, "I take the Bible literally." We cannot take the Bible literally. Let's do this: Let's take this passage of scripture literally. So the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who accidentally discovers a stash of money in some poor old saps field. He takes his shovel and buries it again, covering it and putting brush over it so that it looks like untouched ground. He looks over his shoulder to make sure no one has been watching him. He then goes and sells everything he owns so he can buy the land from the owner who has no idea of the hidden wealth that actually belongs to him. Let me ask you: is this the kind of kingdom you want to belong to? Not me. That is not heavenly behavior, it's crooked behavior.

We cannot take the Bible at face value. Let's use our educated minds. What is the setting? Why is it being written? What comes before and after the verse I am reading? What's the connection? And read it prayerfully.

So, when Jesus says, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like" you know it is a figure of speech. Jesus is not giving approval or disapproval to this man's behavior; he is simply using a common action to teach us about the uncommon Kingdom of Heaven. And this heaven Jesus is talking about is not like a rascal who deceives a landowner out of his money. Rather, Jesus is saying heaven is worth whatever it takes to get it. Whatever sacrifice we have to make, whatever loss we must endure, whatever trade we have to make to bring heaven into our lives is worth the effort. That's what heaven is like.

Jesus also said that heaven is like a merchant in search of pearls; on finding the one pearl of great price he sold all that he had to buy it. This time it's not a hidden treasure, which is found by accident but a pearl on sale in the marketplace. The merchant finds the precious pearl in his daily business rounds. His response? That's the important part. His response tells us the meaning of Jesus' parable. He sells everything he possesses in order to have the pearl.

I like the ancient legend about the monk who found a precious stone, a precious jewel. A short time later, the monk met a traveler, who said he was hungry and asked the monk if he would share some of his provisions. When the monk opened the bag, the traveler saw the precious stone, and, on impulse, asked the monk if he could have it. Amazingly, the monk gave the traveler the stone.

The traveler departed quickly overjoyed with his new possession. However, a few days later, he came back, searching for the monk. He returned the stone to the monk and made a request: "Please give me something more valuable, more precious than this stone. Please give me that which enabled you to give me this precious stone."

A commitment of the whole heart, that's what heaven is...it's what the Kingdom of Heaven requires of its followers. I love this last parable because Jesus does not say the Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl of great price. He says the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, a merchant who finds a great deal on a flawless stone and does everything in his power to close the sale. That's commitment to a greater cause. That's sacrifice and hard work. That's what heaven is like.