

Gift Beyond Compare

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

July 30, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have a challenge: *how do we balance our faith life with our everyday life?*

It's not that we want to be religious just one morning a week – Sunday morning – but we don't want to be so focused on God that we forget to live. We don't want to be “religious” 24*7!

We want to do things with our families and friends. We have to work. We want to have fun and go on holidays. **We want God to be part of our life, but not all of our life.**

Sometimes, we just want to forget about God – about Jesus – about being faithful or religious. We wish that someone else could do it all for us or on behalf.

Historically speaking, delegating “religiousness” to others is exactly people have done – notably, to priests, monks and nuns – to someone who would pray on our behalf.

But this is exactly the opposite of what we see in our Gospel lesson..

A LOOK AT THE BIBLE

Kingdom of Heaven

Our reading today is not a parable or a single story. It is really a collection of snippets that have been grouped together because they all deal with the **kingdom of heaven**.

What is the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of heaven – or kingdom of God – is what we might think of as paradise. It's everything we dream of for a perfect world:

- No natural disasters – no animal attacks
- No sickness –no death
- No hunger – no suffering
- No corruption – no injustice
- No enemies – no wars

It's a place and a time where people can live, free from fear – free from want – where people can enjoy life in fullness – all can live in harmony – even the lion and the lamb. It's a place of perfect peace, peace with justice ... **God's peace that only God can give...**

Ancient Jews knew all about the kingdom of heaven. They knew the prophets had said the Messiah would establish it on earth at the end of days. Some people, of course, thought such talk was just “pie-in-the-sky” – a nice idea or wishful thinking, but, in the face of Roman occupation, it was something needed but not very likely.

Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of heaven. For him, the kingdom of heaven was not something far off in a perfect future. For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven **was at hand** – people could experience it in their own lives even in the face of all the problems and tragedies of life ... at least, a mini-version of it. With God in their everyday life, they could experience the kingdom of God within themselves. Their challenge was learn to recognize it.

That's where the first two snippets come in.

- The kingdom of heaven starts small – like a seed – but, given time will grow into a huge tree;
- The kingdom of heaven is like some yeast that you add into your flour to make bread, for example – it starts small, but given time, the dough will rise until you a terrific loaf of bread.

The message was clear – **instead of looking for paradise on earth which who knows when that will come, look for that small seed or bit of yeast within yourself. Watch it grow – or rise – watch how it transforms you and the people and situations around you.**

The Kingdom of Heaven Transforms

And, if you could experience that kingdom of heaven even for just a moment, then you would know valuable it was and would do almost anything to experience it more and more.

That’s where the other snippets come in

- Someone discovers a treasure in a field that no one owns, so you buy the field just so you could get the treasure.
- Someone is looking for a beautiful pearl. When he finds it, he sells all he has just to buy the pearl he found.
- Fishermen throw their nets into the water – they catch all sorts of fish. They bring it all in, and then sort the good fish – the treasure – from the rest which they throw out.

What the snippets show is how people’s vision of the world was transformed by their finding the treasure. The kingdom of heaven within us changes us.

Of course, none of this makes any sense to people who have never experienced the kingdom of heaven for themselves.

A Faith for Ordinary People

But there’s something else about today’s Gospel lesson that can help us answer the question we started with: **how do we balance our faith life with our everyday life?**

Remember, Jesus was talking:

- at a time when religious experts were telling people how to be holy, and prided themselves on keeping apart from “ordinary” people who had “ordinary” lives;
- at a time when experts studied and debated theological truths – what did this or that passage mean? They often spent their whole lives focused on the Bible;
- at a time when the whole religious system of ancient Judea was organized to ensure that only the purest – only the holiest – people had access to God in the innermost sanctum of the temple – if you didn’t measure up, weren’t the right kind of people from the right background, then you might not even be able to enter the temple at all.

But here is Jesus, talking about one of the most important themes in the Bible – the kingdom of heaven – and he’s talking about it to non-religious people in ordinary words they could understand using examples from everyday life they would know about:

- A farmer
- A housewife
- A landowner
- A merchant
- Some fishermen

His message was so different from what others were saying. God isn't the privilege of the few. He can't be locked up in a building – a church – and kept away from ordinary people. **God isn't there just for the full-time religious experts, and what God has to offer isn't reserved for just a few.**

Anyone can search – anyone can find. You don't have to stop living your normal, everyday life to be "religious". You don't have to be so focused on God that you forget to live.

AN ANSWER FOR TODAY

Now, I believe, we can answer our question: *how do we balance our faith life with our everyday life?*

God in Our Everyday Life

We have it wrong if we think God is calling us to be "religious" 24*7. We have it wrong if we think that Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" means that we have to sit cross-legged or kneeling for the whole day wrapped up in prayer. We have it wrong if we think that thinking about God means separating ourselves from our everyday life.

Jesus is telling us that our everyday life **is exactly where we can find God. Not only that, it's where we can experience God** – or the kingdom of heaven / God's peace / paradise.

- We're spending time with our family and friends – allow ourselves to experience and share their and our love for one another, and recognize that love is a gift from God.
- We have to work in our everyday life? That's never stopped people from finding God ... or rather, that's never stopped God from finding them. David was a shepherd who became a king; Joseph was a carpenter – whatever work we do can become an opening to God.
 - Years ago, I was in Hawaii on vacation and was taking a taxi to the airport to return home ... somewhat depressed, I didn't want to leave Hawaii and I was unhappy about being underemployed.
 - The taxi driver asked what I did and I answered, "I'm just a secretary." He lit into me, "**what do you mean just a secretary?** Don't you know – you set the tone for the whole office! You have the opportunity to shape how your colleagues interact with each other!
- As a Christian, wherever we are and whatever we're doing, we have the opportunity to be a witness to God – to God's kingdom – not by talking about God and Jesus – not by trying to convert others to Christianity (*though we may be called to do just that*) – but by how we work and interact with people we meet.
 - Jews call this, "**God in the marketplace**" – how we live our everyday lives reveals what we believe far more than what we say or claim one day a week in church (or synagogue or temple).
- We want to have fun? Go on vacation? Why not take God along? Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine – I think he knows how to have a good time.

In other words – make God a part of our everyday life. And, if sometimes we just want time away from God – that's OK. God will give us space and time – but expect him to come knocking periodically to say, "**can we get back together now?**"

Being open to God is being open to experiencing the kingdom of heaven in our own lives.

God's Transformative Presence

Being a Christian does not mean being spared problems or stresses.

Experiencing the kingdom of heaven once does not mean that we'll experience it every minute of every day for the rest of our life. **It is a foretaste of the world to come.**

If we experience that kingdom of heaven even one moment in our life, we'll want to experience it more and more. **As we do, something changes within us.**

- Years ago, I led a Bible study on suffering. It didn't go too well because they weren't asking the questions I thought they would be.
 - They had **never** asked those questions because they had **never** suffered!
 - The minister told me later they **had** experienced what **others** might consider suffering: one had been diagnosed with cancer; another had recently miscarried.
 - Their **faith – experience of God** was so strong that they didn't see those events as "suffering"
 - Their experience of God – of God's peace that passes all understanding – of God's kingdom – had transformed the way they looked at life.

CONCLUSION: OUR TIME AT GRACEFIELD

We're here today – taking a break in our own lives before getting back to work.

We have an opportunity:

- To welcome God into our time here – to pause and see if we can find the treasure – the pearl – the seed – the yeast of God's kingdom within us.
- To share that experience of God's kingdom with others –
 - To be farmers, planting the seeds that will grow in them
 - To be cooks, adding the yeast that will rise in them
- To live in a way that reflects God's kingdom – God's peace – in all we do.

How do we balance our faith life with our everyday life?

There's no right answer. Our answer will vary depending on our relationship with God – our experience of the kingdom of heaven in our own lives – **how far we've come in our faith.**

But, if we learn to see the kingdom of heaven in ourselves – if we learn to value it and seek it, we will in time find ourselves transformed in some way – and discover that our faith life *is our everyday life*. With God's help and in God's time.

AMEN