

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

July 27, 2008

Proper 12A - 2008

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, it is great to be back home after 5 weeks away! The welcome Mark and I received at Kapalua Airport really, really touched us deeply – and somehow I have to work that into this sermon.

In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, we meet King Solomon as a young man who has just consolidated his position as successor to his father, King David. The Lord appears to him in a dream asking Solomon what He should give him. Solomon asks for an "understanding mind" (literally a "listening heart" in the original Hebrew) to govern God's people, able to discern between good and evil." There is a great biblical lesson in that phrase; it takes more than knowledge to make wise decisions. The mind informs, but for the ancient people, it was the heart that was the ultimate decision making muscle!

Solomon's answer pleased the Lord, for Solomon had recognized that the people were God's not his and asked for the wisdom to govern them as God would. If you read the First book of Kings, you'll see that Solomon's wisdom brought the nation all the human heart could desire – wealth, power, security and expansion in land holdings to the greatest ever known. You'll also see how good intentions led to an imperial system that contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. "All the human heart can desire", it seems, is still inadequate for human happiness. In Jesus 'day, many

Jews expected the Messiah to restore Israel to the glory it knew under David and Solomon. Many still have such imperial expectations of God.

After not having written a sermon in a while, I had to check to see where we are in Matthew's narrative about the life of Jesus. Jesus is about midway through his public ministry. He has gathered his disciples, done works of wonder and healing and has given his teachings on the Law. But, like anyone who has new ideas that challenge the certainties and privileges of the status quo, he is being challenged and rejected by the Pharisees and others in power.

Jesus now turns to teaching the crowds and he teaches in parables using images from the daily lives of the common people. As I have said before, parables are a unique way of teaching. They always contain something that surprises or just doesn't make sense. This engages the listener. Parables are meant to present questions rather than give answers. They are meant to invite discernment and conversation among people as to their meaning and relevance.

Today's Gospel reading gives us a number of parables, each of which could be a sermon. All are about the "kingdom of heaven" – bible talk for the world as God would have it be. The first likens God's kingdom to a mustard seed that someone planted in his field; the smallest of seeds becomes a tree that birds can nest in. It is a lovely image, but all Jesus' listeners would know that no one in his or her right mind would plant a mustard seed in their field. The Levitical law specified where in a garden it could be grown. Far from growing into a big tree, it was a shrubby thing that was a pest and could spread everywhere and take over – sort of like the shrubs that become tumbleweeds on Pulehu Road near the dump. What's that mean?

The second likens God's kingdom to yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it all was leavened. Now three measures of flour are about 50 lbs. worth – enough to make well over 100 loaves of bread. What woman in her right mind would bake that much for one day? Also, yeast in those days wasn't our fast acting Fleischman's packets. It was like our sour dough starter. How long would that take to work on 50 lbs. of flour? What has that got to do with God's Kingdom?

The third and fourth parables are often paired together, but actually are quite different. In the third, God's kingdom is compared to a treasure hidden in a field that someone finds and hides again. Then he sells what he has and goes and buys that field. Jesus' listeners would know that in those days before safety deposit boxes, people buried their valuables in the ground to hide them from thieves and conquering armies. But the lawyer in me clicked on and I thought, "Wait a minute, the guy doesn't own the land, so what's he doing digging around on someone else's land?" Chances are he is a tenant farmer, maybe the foreclosed former owner, who is plowing the new owner's crops. Under the law, anything he finds on the land is the property of the landowner. So what does he do? He hides the treasure again and buys the land back from the unwitting owner so that the treasure will be his. What is that suppose to mean? I mean it sounds kind of crooked to me. What does this have to do with the Kingdom of God?

In the fourth, God's kingdom is compared to a merchant out seeking fine pearls who, when he discovers one of great value, trades in all the others he has to acquire it. Even back then, no one put all their eggs in one basket. What is this suppose to mean?

Finally, Jesus compares God's kingdom to a net that is pulled from the sea containing fish of every kind, both clean and unclean under the law. Lat, it is God who decides which is evil and which is righteous.

I'll leave it up to you to tease meaning out of these parables. To do this you'll have to bring your lives and experiences to the parables – and we will have different answers and that is ok. However, I'll share some observations from my experiences. Unlike the “far away up on a throne in heaven” God of my childhood, I've come to see that God is not imperial and majestic, but like a mustard seed, God's love and presence are found everywhere. Like that pesky mustard seed, God's love is prolific and profligate and it can take root anywhere it wishes. We are the ones who have to see it and decides to let it grow and spread. In the process, I learned that God is not stingy or mean spirited and we shouldn't be either.

I have discovered God's love isn't locked up in a big safe that has many names – certainty, orthodoxy, self-righteousness, belonging to the right group, even “ the church”. No it can be found anywhere and is hidden in plain view. Of course we have to learn to see and recognize it when we stumble over it. That is the tricky part, developing not only the values but also the vulnerability to recognize God's kingdom in the world we live in. I have learned that it is not ours to possess but only ours to see and give away.

I have learned that God's love is subversive to all who would claim ownership of it. It defies those who build walls to exclude. It defies those who would channel it in any given direction. Today, we hear a lot about civic religion and political power to enforce it. This kind of religion is big loud and brassy. It is easy to spot. But the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that will be blown and germinate where God

wishes and, like a bit of yeast starter, will slowly but surely change and transform its host culture. It is slow and quiet and it takes faith and a listening heart to detect it.

When Mark and I last visited Maui as tourists in April 2005, we made a couple of decisions: 1. we would never buy that house in Becket, MA that we have just sold and 2. this would probably be our last time on Maui since we had been to every beach, seen all the sights and eaten at every good restaurant. All it took was one Sunday morning visit to Holy Innocents Church in Lahaina to change everything! Maui ceased to be an object to be possessed or consumed but increasingly Maui became a place where the Kingdom sought us out and to which we were so lovingly welcomed back home this Wednesday. God's kingdom was hidden in plain sight! So, see, I did manage to get it into the sermon! Mahalo a nui loa to you all for being the yeast in our lives. Aloha.