



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Paradox: Caught Up In The End

January 28, 2024

Prelude – Anchor of Hope by Ellie Holcomb

WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. **To come together on this day made for us, a day where we awoke into our Father's work finished.** A day to rest in God with us, God for us. A day to set our minds' attention and hearts' affection upon Jesus, so that we might be the church, spiritual companions in gospel community, following Jesus together in our ordinary roles and relationships.

To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, remembering whose and who we are in Jesus. So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and **we'd like to invite you to church**, into the relationships that make the church indeed a faith family through Jesus. Your first step would be to fill out one of the little black cards found on the table when you first walked in.

Speaking of a time and place for worship, will you join me in settling our hearts and minds upon the truth that God is with us, here and now, as we enter into worship through scripture and song, conversation, and communion? Pray with me.

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 27:1-7

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

SONG #1 – Lord I Need You by Matt Maher

PRAISING GOD FOR & PRAYING FOR GRACE |

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | **Returning To The End**

The stories Jesus tells, the parables as we more commonly refer to them, do not define or synthesize or summarise life with God, a life lived in His presence and towards His purposes, a life lived in what our scriptures call the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But they do describe it.

By painting word pictures on top of his declarative doctrines, Jesus forces open our imagination, and our faith, to envision real, everyday life that, even if we are not expecting it, challenges our notions, our explicit and hidden assumptions of life with God. Often, through the paradoxes these portraits unveil. Like this paradox that Malcolm Guite describes this:

"the Kingdom of God, on the one hand is sheer grace, all achieved *for us*, and, if we will let him, achieved *in us* by Christ...on the other hand, to find it, to recognize it, to yearn for it, is to let go of everything else."

(Malcolm Guite)

It's this paradox which our 2024 *Kingdom Epiphanies* have led us into. We began with [parables from Luke](#), where the Kingdom of God found us. Life with God was described as a life where we are ***found and brought home to our place, and our purpose (value) is restored***. And our need to be found, coupled with God's finding, was called repentance, a turning that was more like a return.

In the [parables in Matthew 13](#), over the last two weeks, the kingdom of heaven, life with God lived in His presence and towards His purposes, was described as ***an abundant treasure we find and a drive to keep finding more of what we have***. Whether stumbled over or searched after, life with God, as these stories described, would have us *turn over* all we hold onto and take hold of life as beautiful and of great worth.

Today's parable finds us coming full circle, back to where we started, not finding but found, actually more like caught up in the work of the Son. And so finding, Lord willing, peace amid the murky middle.

Let's pray as ___ comes to read our final *Kingdom Epiphany*.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 13:47-50

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was thrown into the sea and of every kind gathered together, which, when it was full, they drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers and the bad they cast out. So it will be at the consummation of the age. The angels will go out and separate the evil from the midst of the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

SERMON | Caught In The End

'Have you understood these things?' They said to Jesus, 'Yes.' And he said...' Therefore every **scribe** who has been **trained in the kingdom of heaven** is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. (Matthew 13:51-52)

We will need a bit more context to “understand” our story today, especially in a manner that “trains us in the kingdom of heaven” so that we live wisely and share that wisdom with others. So grab your Bible, open to Matthew 13, and follow along through the sub-titles—which might be off sometimes, but do come in handy on occasion!

Matthew 13 is a chapter full of stories (v. 3, 34). Stories Jesus told to the crowds gathered (v. 2, 34) to see him and hear from him in hopes of finding something for which they were searching from him. Stories also told and discussed with his disciples (v.10, 36), those who had apprenticed themselves to him, looking to and learning from him the way of making a life with God work.

The stories begin with the indiscriminate sowing of good seed.

A sower went out to sow...as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path...Other seeds fell on rocky ground...Other seeds fell among thorns....Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold... (v. 3-8)

The seed that, as the story unfolded, we learned produced an abundant fold when conditions were right. While the seed was good, it did not always land in a place where its abundance could be experienced in fullness. Still, the sower went on a sowing.

The next story follows a similar trajectory.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field...but his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat... (v. 24-25)

This time, the seed sowed is called good at the get-go, and the obstacle to health and harvest is not the soil but the efforts of “his enemy” to get the sower to scrap the whole thing and start over by sowing weeds among the wheat. Yet the sower won't take the bait.

'...lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn.' (v. 29-30)

Despite the obstacles of weeds and wheat growing together, the sower instructs his servants to tend to both and sort them out when the harvest arrives. When the time of growth is complete, then we'll carefully and painstakingly separate what is made to last and what was never intended to.

In these parables, life with God is depicted by Jesus as life unfolding under the efforts of an indiscriminate, patient sower willing to do double work at the end and, despite such unorthodox methods, gathers in abundance (thirty,

sixty, and a hundredfold (v. 8)) in the end. Such a picture comes across like a bad fairy tale. One lacking practical insights and propagating naïve hopes and habits. Perhaps that's why Jesus adds a few more stories. The first two are practical.

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed...the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds...come and make nests in its branches. (v. 31-32)

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. (v. 33)

A mustard seed sowed, a seed as tiny as the period at the end of this sentence, and yet grows into something much larger and more inclusive than its starting proportions would predict. Then leaven, hidden in the product of the wheat (the flour), something small in size and proportion but having a tremendous, formative, and delicious impact on the thing being made. Neither is hard to imagine. Both are real examples of significant realities that are commonplace enough and so often overlooked.

Having been primed in the practical, the following two stories return us to the fairy tale.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...like a merchant in search of fine pearls... (v. 44-45)

They invite us to fill in the images' details as we find the treasure hidden and search out the tremendously beautiful and valuable. And then, once again defying the immediate practicality of survival, go after that which ensures thriving now and forever with all we have.

Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field...on finding...went and sold all that he had found and bought it. (v. 44, 46)

Yet between these four short similitudes, in verses 36 to 43, the disciples get off track somehow. Rather than receiving more in the stories because of their blessed eyes, ears, and open hearts (v. 11-17), their imagination narrows. They lose sight of the whole picture and focus solely on one part of one story.

If you read the [pastoral note this week](#), you know what I am talking about. While Jesus was telling all who would listen about the expansiveness, patience, and persistence of life with God, even if paradoxically easy to overlook its present reality, the disciples heard that there is evil, weeds, *darnel* (a wheat-like weed), bad seed in the same place where the good seed is sown.

'How then does the field have weeds?' The Master said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' (v. 27-28)

And while it's known to the sower to have been snuck in by an enemy, thus there for nefarious purposes but not a perplexing one, it won't be taken out until the time for growing has reached its maturation. While the sower wasn't baffled at the source or the solution, the disciples were, and so they demanded of Jesus,

'Explain to us the parable of the *weeds* of the field.' (v. 36)

It's not unreasonable for the disciples to get honed in on this one thing in one story, even though there was so much more in the descriptions surrounding it. After all, their history of faith, their expectation of being chosen and set apart by God, by its very nature, was separationist. Their inclusion in life with God depended on excluding "bad seeds." Surely, they thought, their future of faith, their expectation of being with God, meant a further and fuller separation than they had already known.

Good seeds sown on all kinds of soil, they could at least partially get. The good soil would be distinct, separated from the poorer soils—rock, thorny, or compact, whether by nature or cultivation or use. But bad seed mixed in with good seed, weeds among the wheat, and allowed to stay mixed in, now that is an altogether different image than their hearts and heads had envisioned. I am not sure we're all that different as disciples today.

We love the stories of abundance, of finding treasure and fine pearls, of being lost and found, brought home and restored. And we don't mind so much the stories that depict the clear boundaries of life with God...soft soil, cleared out soil, tilled and ready soil. Those images give us something to aim for. But stories where the separating action is delayed, even if it is for the good, unsettle us.

The disciples' missing of the point initially shuts down the conversation. We know because Jesus ended his explanation to his apprentices the same way he did his parable to the crowds,

"He who has ears, let him hear" (v. 9, 43b)

Jesus is thus saying the disciples are acting more like the crowds, like ones repeating Isaiah's climate (vs. 13-15)

hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand... (v. 13)

rather than ones open into more.

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven...For to the one who has, more will be given...blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (v. 11-12, 16)

Nevertheless, as is his habit, Jesus does get to the heart of their inquiry and **reveals why their hearts were so focused on this particular particularity:**

Jesus answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the consummation of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned in fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (v. 37-43a)

What received six verses of attention in the story receives just two quick-hitting verses in the explanation. And what received half of the verse of focus in the story gets a weighty three in the explanation. Jesus knew what was on his disciple's minds and in their hearts.

Maybe the disciples focused on the weeds because they were afraid that the weeds would take over, ruin, or even prevent the harvest. Maybe the disciples were focused on the weeds because they feared that if there was a mixing

of good and bad seeds in the soil, they might be weeds rather than wheat. Maybe the disciples were focused on the weeds because they feared that life with Jesus would not be what they envisioned when they gave their lives to be his apprentices. Maybe they were focused on the weeds because they were afraid if things didn't change right now, they would never (much less forever) change.

While Jesus' story invited his disciples to dwell deeply on a depiction of an intimate, patient, persistent, and ultimately abundantly successful sower of good seeds *even when* weeds are purposely mixed in (which means he's even more competent to handle the inevitably mixed-in rocks and thorns), **the disciples focus and fear suffocated their imagination, their faith to receive more.** Jesus' explanation, while not indulging their fascination with the weeds, does free them from it.

Here is how. The sower is not merely an imaged simile, some random farmer that pops into our head, but the promised person whom they know (The Son of Man), and the harvest is both the "consummation of the age" (happening when time reaches its purpose end) as well as executed under this promised-person-whom-they-know's command. The work and workers proceed from him on the ground, in the neighborhood, knowing intimately about the situation. And, his divine agents act to gather out of *his Kingdom* and his Father's field, all that would keep them from flourishing fully and forever—all causes of sin (sower of weeds) as well as those practicing lawlessness, going the way of the weeds. And so, in the end, the good seed will be shown to be what it was, good seed sown by the sower, matured to health and harvest because of the sower king's patience and persistence work and his final judgment—not anything else.

The enemy, it seems, doesn't just miss out on the last laugh, but can't stop the wheat from maturing now. Truly, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear...of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1) As the psalmist said and _____ read for us.

Freed from their singular focus and fears, the disciples can now dream again...imagine again...and get on really living by faith! And so the stories of the treasure finder and pearl seeker. But Jesus doesn't end with those two stories. He tells the disciples one final story, one more invitation to dialogue, conversation, and communion, after which he asks the disciples if they understand (v. 51), wanting to be sure they do indeed get the point they missed. It's our final story, too. It is a story of being caught in the end, found in His life and purposes even in the mixed and murky waters.

Notice what Jesus says,

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was thrown into the sea and of every kind gathered together, [The word dragnet is unique to Matthew's gospel. It describes a particular type of fishing net with floaters on top and weights on the bottom and is usually pulled by two or more boats, catching everything from the water's surface to the seafloor in its webbing. It's a net, when moving, too big and wide for any creature much less piece of trash to avoid. It's not a net used to catch a particular kind of fish or thing, but one that is indiscriminate in its encompassment. And so, as Jesus says, it *gathered every kind together.*

Notice Jesus doesn't use the word "fish." I am sure the word is added in your translation, but it's not in the original language. Like us, translators filled in the presumed missing part because, well, who wouldn't? But in doing so, the story becomes about separating types of fish and figuring out which fish you are, and they are and which ones are good and bad, and ultimately ending up back again at the weed and the wheat focus. More concerned about the particular rather than big picture. So Jesus doesn't say God's life and purposes catch just fish, but everything in existence. Good luck trying to focus on the particular in that image!

which, when it was full, they drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers and the bad they cast out. So it will be at the consummation of the age. [Similar to the wheat and weeds, everything caught in the kingdom gets *drawn up towards its fullness*, towards the purposed end of the net caster, good seed sower. *Only then, at the end*, does the separating take place, and not by any human agent but by the divine ones, and for the purpose of casting out the evil from the midst, the middle of the righteous. Again, what is removed is what was never meant to last for good.

The angels will go out and separate the evil from the midst of the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. [While that last phrase feels menacing and is meant to stir emotion, it is a Matthenian way of denoting the “extreme sorrow and [intense] emotion...[at] exclusion from the blessings of God,”¹ of life with Him. It is what we feel when we discover that we are not found in His presence, caught up in His good purposes.

Jesus knows that in all the conversations and images of found and finding, it's easy to get caught up and focus on particulars, usually because of fear of missing out somehow. And so he invites his disciples and us not to get caught in a focus and fear that narrows our vision of life with Him, but to be caught in the peace of His life, His kingdom, as mixed and murky as it may be for the moment, living now as we will live then, by his patient, persistent, intimate work. Living as if we really believed the world, while inhabited by weeds, a place where we can get lost or buried, is also a place where we can be found and find treasure hidden where we make a living and incredible beauty and value along our journey, if we are looking for it.

Or, as the apostle Paul would later say it,

...in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. **The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us.** And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this.

Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, **God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.** God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. **God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured.**

This is not only clear, but it's *now*—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness. (Romans 3:21-26)

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*, 503.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION | Responding to the Light of Jesus

- Is there anything keeping me from seeing the full picture Jesus is painting? Or living into it? A particular focus and/or fear?
- How is this parable inviting me into peace?

SONG #3 – Greater Than by Citizens

COMMUNION |

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life. (Ephesians 1:11-14)

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Christ's body and blood: for us, they were given.
This bread and this cup tell us we're forgiven.
Found in His life and purposes,
here we remain, finding His life in ours.
To the glory of the Father,
by the strength of the Spirit,
through the work of the Son,
Amen

SONG #4 – There Is One Gospel by CityAlight

BENEDICTION | Ephesians 1:3-10

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly* free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.