

## Proper 12A 2020 Sermon

*Matthew 13:31-33,44-52*

*Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

*He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."*

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

*"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."*

"Life is difficult." That's how psychiatrist Scott Peck began his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*. And if Dr. Peck could make that statement in 1978, when he published his book, how much *more* is it true **today**, for us, during this time of pandemic, when over 4 million Americans have been infected with this disease, and it has killed over 145,000 of us? **More** Americans have now died from COVID-19 than died in battle during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Spanish-American War, World War I, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Desert Shield, and Desert Storm *combined*.<sup>1</sup> And we are only 6 months into this pandemic! Today, *in Florida alone*, one person dies of COVID-19 every 8 minutes.<sup>2</sup> And these statistics about *deaths* from COVID-19 don't take into account those who

*survive*, but have permanent damage to their lungs, kidneys, brain, heart, blood vessels, etc.

Life **is** difficult! This is simply the reality of our world today. But the question for *us*, as Christians, is: How do we, as followers of Jesus, *respond* to this reality?

For, as you know, what makes our lives so difficult is not simply the virus, and the illness, death, and economic fallout which it brings. What makes our lives so difficult today is also the misguided ways we *respond* to the realities which this virus has brought about. We have seen that we can get fearful and self-protective, stockpiling toilet paper and hand sanitizer, buying way more than we need, while leaving the shelves empty for others. We have seen that we can get angry, frustrated, and resentful of certain limits to our freedoms – limits which are simply intended to slow the spread of the virus, which benefits us all. We have seen that we can lash out at scientists, public health experts, and the leaders of governments, schools, and churches who, *never* having been in such a situation before, are most often simply doing the best they know how – in an uncertain time, facing an uncertain future – trying to protect the physically and financially vulnerable among us, while trying to control and mitigate the spread of this life-threatening virus, about which there is still so much we do not know.

How **do** we, as followers of Jesus, *respond* to the difficult realities of life which face us today?

If we listen to what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel lesson, and what Jesus said in the verse quoted in the hymn we just sang, I think we can see how we might, at least, begin: We seek **first** the Kingdom of God (which Matthew calls the Kingdom of Heaven),<sup>3</sup> and we respond *from there*. Where do we *look for* the Kingdom of God? Where do we find it? In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells us, "The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!'; because the Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21, TEV) The Kingdom of God is *within* us. And Jesus *speaks* about this Kingdom of God *more* than any other topic, using parables and metaphors and similes to try to *describe* this Kingdom, as he does in today's Gospel.

"The kingdom of heaven," Jesus says, "is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Speaking about this parable, John Shea says, "Our spiritual core... **is** the one, true treasure. But it cannot be found on the surface of life, in

the tangle of physical and social interactions. It is hidden, buried in the field of ourselves.

“Therefore, it *can* go undiscovered...

“Not finding this treasure is akin to Meister Eckhart’s remark that each person has a vintage wine cellar, but they seldom drink from it.

“So when we come upon this spiritual depth, this kingdom of heaven within us (see Luke 17:21; NRSV alternative trans.), it surprises us. We *see* it, and then we *don’t* see it. Our mind flickers, *finding* it and *hiding* it simultaneously. But we see **enough** to experience how valuable it is, and we desire more. Therefore, we are not reluctant to realign our energies, to sell everything in order to pursue what we have found. In fact, we do it joyously because of the actuality of what we have found and the promise of what will happen when we buy. Entry into the kingdom [of God] is a full process of finding, selling, and buying.”<sup>4</sup> (unquote)

And in case Jesus’ listeners do not get his message from the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, he next tells the parable of the Pearl of Great Price, the point of which is the same: Entry into the kingdom of

God involves first *finding* this kingdom within our souls, then *selling* (letting go of or down-grading in priority) anything that might **keep** us from giving the Kingdom of God central place in our lives; and then “buying” the hidden treasure, or the Pearl of Great Price. Selling the farm, so to speak, in order to put our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength into living life **from** the Kingdom of God which has been hidden within us, but is now beginning to be recognized as both desirable and priceless.

And so, maybe the question for us as followers of Jesus *today* is not so much, “**How** do we respond to life’s many difficulties during this time of pandemic?”, but rather, “*From where* do we respond?” Do we respond from a place of anger, fear, frustration, depression, partisan ideology, a defiant claim of personal freedom, self-interest, or ego – all of which can be characteristic of “the kingdom of *this* world”? Or do we seek first the Kingdom of God within us, center ourselves there, and respond from the love, compassion, forgiveness, and grace which are the operative motivations and energies within God’s Realm, the Kingdom of Heaven?

*From what place* do we respond to the difficulties of this time in which we live?

My friends, over these past 2 weeks, when I've taken some time off, it has become clear that this is a question I need to repeatedly ask myself: From what place am I responding to the difficulties of this time, and the situation in which I find myself? You see, I missed the courses in seminary on "Pandemics" and "How to run a Virtual Church." I have been spending twice the time doing things I'm half as good at, with little emotional or relational reward. And since I have had to spend so much time learning new technology and implementing that technology to communicate with our parish, our Region, our Diocese, and to offer online worship and resources, it's been easy for me to unconsciously let my center drift into the kingdom of this world, where technology resides, and where I have found myself falling into the trap of "doom-scrolling," reading all the emerging information on the virus, case and death statistics, the partisan arguments surrounding "opening" churches, stores, bars, gyms, and the baffling politicization of wearing masks. I have let my center drift into the maelstrom of this world's anxieties and contentiousness.

Life **is** difficult at this time – at least, it is for me. And I suspect it has been so for most all of us. So much of the future is unknown, uncertain, and there are contradictory values to weigh. We were created for person-to-person relationship, and many of us are hungry for in-person contact; and yet, at the same time, the fact of reality is that physical proximity to other people at this time is potentially lethal – especially for people at higher risk (which is most of our

congregation) and during this time when the rate of new cases of COVID-19 in our county is increasing. We long for in-person contact, and yet *none* of us wants to be the unwitting cause of someone else's serious illness or even death. It is easy to see how living with such a degree of uncertainty and conflicting values might cause frustration, discouragement, depression, anger, protest, rebellion.

Life is difficult; and I don't know the answer to its many problems. None of us does. But I do know this: In *responding* to the difficult realities of our world today, it makes *all the difference in the world* **where** we are coming from, where our center resides: in the "outer" kingdom of this world, where frustration, anger, blaming, and protest reign; or in the Kingdom of God, that priceless treasure hidden and found within us, where peace, love, compassion, mercy, and grace are the motivating energies empowering every action. We first need to *find* that hidden treasure, which often involves some regular spiritual practice; then sell (let go of, or demote in importance) all that threatens to usurp the Kingdom's primacy in our life; and then buy the precious Kingdom by giving it all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The cost is indeed great; but I think we will find that it is cheap at any price.

AMEN

1 US Department of Veteran Affairs. Battle Deaths in the mentioned wars total 134,723.

[https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs\\_american\\_wars.pdf](https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_american_wars.pdf)

2 <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-07-23/a-coronavirus-death-every-8-minutes-this-florida-community-fears-who-will-be-next>

3 Matthew is perhaps the most Jewish of all the Gospels, and since in Jewish tradition one never speaks the word or name of “God” (Jews often spell it “G\_d”), Matthew uses the circumlocution, “Kingdom of Heaven.”

4 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 236