

July 19, 2020
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19
Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16
Romans 8:26-27
Matthew 13:24-43

In today's Gospel reading we observe Jesus instructing the people with three more short parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. Noteworthy is the fact that these three parables are directly related to last week's parable concerning the sower, the seed, and the soil conditions.

The first parable today describes the unfortunate combination of both good and bad seed being planted in the same field. The second example concerns a very tiny mustard seed growing to a point that even the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches. The third illustration mentions the process of a little yeast permeating the whole batch of wheat bread dough.

Hence, it would be wise for us to remember that all of these parables in some way or another describe the inner mechanics of the Kingdom of Heaven. Even though cloaked in 1st Century agricultural terms, each riddle is meant to cause the listener to consider his or her current status in the celestial kingdom.

So a word about interpreting these parables, even though they are spelled out in simple story form they really do require a measure of spiritual wisdom to discern. For example, notice that after finishing His teaching and after Jesus sent the crowds away His disciples wondered, - what did He just say please explain to us?

Why God would allow evil to cohabitate with good was too much for them to fathom. Subsequently, they asked for an explanation

concerning the tares being allowed to remain and grow alongside the wheat.

Subsequently Jesus explained that there are two different types of people in the world. There are those who are children of the kingdom, and there are those who are children of the evil one. Often these two types of people are mixed together in the world; they live together in the same neighborhoods, they may attend the same churches and schools, and in fact sometimes they even look, act, and sound like each other.

However, in the end, the evil one's group will be gathered and burned, and the kingdom group will be gathered into Heaven for a great reward. Finally, Jesus ended His explanation with, "Whoever has ears ought to hear."

Here again we are challenged with the phrase, "Whoever has ears ought to hear," and what exactly does it mean? Good question, however before we address that question let us consider a few more thoughts in regard to this parable and the two succeeding parables.

At first glance one would have to wonder how anyone could sneak in at night and sow a whole field full of tares? Obviously an agricultural idiom this parable is unquestionably intended to be a riddle or a mystery of a spiritual nature.

Then what about the idea of leaving the wheat and the tares to grow together, what is the spiritual relevance as it pertains to us today? As mentioned a moment ago, the fact of the matter is that the Church and the world contain both good and evil seed types. They often coincide right next to each other. Good leaders and evil

workers, people who work for the good all, and people whose work brings harm to all, and unfortunately the same holds true in both the religious and secular worlds, both good and evil seem to coexist together.

However speaking to the disciples - Jesus eventually makes the point that there will come a day of reckoning where God will separate the wheat from the chaff and all will be made known and revealed in public. So let those who have ears need to listen, take heed, and be saved.

It's important to reiterate the fact that Jesus was here speaking in regards to the Kingdom of Heaven. Today, all three parables begin with the qualifier, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like." The Kingdom of Heaven is like a sower who sows seed; the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed; the Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven.

One sower sows good seed, one sows bad seed; one tiny mustard seed turns into a large tree that shelters the birds of the air; and one small lump of leaven invades or permeates the whole batch of dough. The hidden common denominator concerning these three parables is the fact that the kingdom starts out small but ends up being mighty.

Indeed, the kingdom starts out looking like not much - but in the final analysis ends up looking totally awesome.

In the second parable today Jesus caught the people's attention with the fact that no one in their right mind would go out to sow mustard seeds. First of all they were considered ugly intrusive weeds that once established were extremely difficult to uproot or stamp out. Like dandelions and bull thistles in a garden or lawn

once established they just keep on reappearing every year in larger and larger numbers.

So let me ask, does anyone want some mustard seeds to sow in their garden? Amazing - I see no takers for their earthly gardens. But on the other hand, the thought here is to think in dynamic kingdom principles and consider the power of one single mustard seed (the tiniest of seeds) and then think about a whole multitude of mustard seed kingdom type people – who with the capabilities of a spiritual mustard seed - being sown into the world and how might they collectively make a difference for Christ?

Here we might recall the words of St Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3, “You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.”

Lest any should worry about the importance or the potential of the single individual, Jesus likened one’s importance in terms of just one tiny mustard seed that even though planted in somewhat adverse growing conditions, it can quickly grow into a rather large bush like tree providing shelter to both humans as well as the animals and birds of the air.

If that’s not enough to make one marvel, Jesus then compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a little amount of leaven yeast that is capable of invading the whole lump of dough making it grow in capacity and texture. Often left in the dark and out of sight the yeast bacteria goes to work eating micro bits of the wheat creating gas bubbles that interact with the flour pushing the wheat dough in every direction causing it to grow and take shape.

Because leaven is a bacterium that makes waste products in the form of gas, it was considered unclean by Jews during times of ritual fasting and therefore it was indeed an unlikely substance to be used in describing the Kingdom of God. Yet, Jesus talked about a woman who mixed three measures of flour with leaven. Indeed, the amount of flour was intended to catch the attention of the people, what woman would even think of mixing a 50 lb. sack of flour with leaven. Who could bake that much bread at one time?

Well for sure God could, the point being - the Kingdom multiplies and takes form like growing leavened bread dough. How many wheat seeds would you have to crush to make 50 lbs. of flour? The answer is – a lot. Yet in the Kingdom, God started with only one seed, His only begotten Son, who then trained 12 Apostles, lost one, only to gain many more disciples who then went out to evangelize the whole world.

Think about it, from a remotely despised 1st Century Roman outpost in Judea, Christianity spread like wildfire across the then known world. And why did it grow so fast; persecution, the more governments try to subdue it the faster it grows.

Without taking a whole lot of time to elaborate we can also discern another very interesting point concerning the parables, especially the last one about the leavened bread dough. Upon closer examination of these parables one can certainly notice the Eucharistic overtones in the sacred texts.

God gathers the many, yet who are few, He blesses, and mixes them together, He then breaks them and penetrates them with the leavened power of the Holy Spirit, and they in turn become the spiritual food for all to eat. From one single, comely, and ordinary

bread wafer, the consecrated Eucharistic Host becomes the Body and Blood of Jesus capable of feeding the entire world; indeed, it is a truly amazing and awesome mystery.

Ok, so now hopefully we have a little better understanding of Jesus' parables; however, there is one last key point to remember, Jesus was adamant that one must have ears to hear to understand the importance of His message.

So here is what Jesus told the disciples in private. Some day in the future, and nobody knows the day or the hour, there will be a day of reckoning where the Lord God will send out His angels to bring in the harvest for an accounting. Subsequently all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness will be cast out of God's presence to be burned, and those who have obeyed the kingdom principles will be rewarded.

So then, lets stop here for a moment to consider this last rather disturbing finale to today's Gospel reading, indeed it often becomes a subject that lends itself to a great deal of controversy and division.

The potential controversy involves whether or not God will actually punish people for their disobedience. The Scripture does state, "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His Kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness and will cast them into the furnace of fire where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

So the question will invariably come up, what exactly did Jesus mean by this statement? Was He serious about this matter, or

were His statements to be considered as just another metaphor or part of the parables.

Today there are growing numbers of people who absolutely chafe at the idea that God would punish people for their wrongful behavior. Their idea of a merciful God is one who unconditionally forgives without accountability to previously held standards of holiness. In other words, for them if God punishes lawlessness He is not being loving. To facilitate their own agenda some even demand that Scripture be afforded different interpretations depending on the prerogatives of the given culture or subculture.

So, back to the statement Jesus gave to His disciples. “Those who practice lawlessness will be cast into the furnace of fire.

Webster’s Dictionary defines lawlessness as, “not regulated by or based on law, or not restrained or controlled by law.” In other words practicing lawlessness can be defined as making decisions based on one’s own understanding or passions while disregarding God’s Law concerning the matter.

What we tend to forget is that God in His mercy established a covenant with mankind, and that covenants do have terms and consequences. God does have specific rules and regulations concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, and subsequently I would think it would be prudent for us to recognize those rules and regulations in the context of the keeping of the Law.

In conclusion let us remember that the parables Jesus taught leave us with much to consider. Again, parables are meant to cause us to think. My goal this morning, as it is in every homily is to direct people to Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. God authored

the Holy Scriptures for our benefit, and so we are to be encouraged to read them, meditate, pray, and rest in His Presence.

Once heard and internalized, the Scriptures by the power of the Holy Spirit will speak for themselves to those who have ears to hear. Those who don't have ears to hear will probably not hear anyway, at least not until they truly desire to listen.

The choice is ours to make.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.