

## “Heaven Among Us”

First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
August 20, 2017

**Old Testament lesson: Psalm 119: 129-136**

**New Testament lesson: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

A religious leader once surprised a group of learned guests by asking, “Where does God live?” They laughed at him. “What are you saying? Surely the world is full of his glory!” But he answered his own question: “God lives where people admit him.” In the words of writer Gerd Theissen in *The Open Door: Variations on Biblical Themes*, “If we recognize that God is where we admit him, then our question changes. In that case we no longer ask ‘Where is God? Where can God be experienced? Where do we encounter him?’ But (rather), we notice that we are being asked, ‘Where are you? Where do you admit God into your life? ... Where do you make room for God?’”<sup>1</sup>

This begs the question: If God is in heaven, what and where is heaven? Jesus, some 2,000 years ago, was surrounded by followers seeking insight into these very questions. And he said to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..., like yeast..., like treasure..., like a merchant in search of fine pearls..., like a net ... thrown into the sea....”

Here is Jesus trying to explain to us what heaven is like, and what it means to us. So let’s look a little closer at what he said. A mustard seed!?! What does that mean? Well, stated simply, a mustard seed is very small, but it grows into a huge tree. Google it! The pictures are amazing. It grows into a huge tree, “so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

This means the kingdom of heaven is useful in the scheme of God’s worldly creation, not some far off place we get to in the end. It’s a place where the most vulnerable and the most powerful thrive alongside one another, in peace. Birds are both vulnerable and powerful – the power of flight. And so are people – we all have our vulnerability and we all have the power to act in this world, to show and share the grace and beauty that God has blessed us with, for the good of all creation.

If we are to recognize that the kingdom of heaven is here on earth like Jesus assures us – and help to bring it into its fullness – we must seek to bring peace and unity to all creation all people, from the most vulnerable to the most powerful, in accordance to God’s will.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Theissen in *The Open Door: Variations on Biblical Themes* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991], 107).

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. Yeast is a living organism that when mixed with flour causes a chemical change that literally gives rise to bread. It is a change agent for other parts of creation, in this case grain or flour.

To do our part in bringing about the kingdom of heaven, we must be change agents – each of us, and us together as a church. As an agent or catalyst for change, you have the power to transform the world you live in, the world around you.

Are your relationships not what they should be? You can change that. Is your self confidence not what it could be? Don't make yourself small – rise to the challenge; live into the kingdom of heaven.

Is our corner of Pleasant and Lexington in need of the Gospel message – because people are not putting themselves in a place to hear it? We have the power to change that. We have the power to touch lives in our community, one person at a time. Go out and meet your neighbors and share with them some aspect of the Gospel. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure...,” says Jesus. Treasure is valuable. It's worth more than anything else. That's why the person in Jesus' parable who found it “goes and sells all that he has and buys the field” where the treasure is hidden.

What is it worth to you to share the Gospel with those who have not yet heard it, to show the love of Christ to those who have not yet experienced it, to take your relationship with Jesus out onto the streets, into your workplace or school, into your home?

Is it worth pushing through whatever resistance there might be? Jesus says it is. He says it's worth more than anything. He says that our faith is the most valuable possession we have, and the greatest gift we can give to another human being. “Again,” says Jesus, “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.” In other words, people search their whole lives long for the kingdom of heaven. Why would we hide that from them?

Why wouldn't we scream it from the roof tops – “People, hear me – hear us – we have something for you. It's a gift from God – something incredibly valuable, something that will change your life, something that may not look like much now – not much more than a mustard seed – but, O boy, let it grow and watch what it can do for you and your family and for this world we live in!” Call the people you haven't seen in church and tell them this – that there's something here for them that will change their lives. Tell them how it's changed your life. “Again,” Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.” This means that it is all embracing, that no one is excluded from God's heaven on earth.

And so it is, here, at this church. Anyone and everyone is welcome here. I know you feel that, both members and visitors. And that is a blessing. That is a gift. Thank you. Thank God.

We have a church full of people here today, as full as we are – people who know what it's like to glimpse the kingdom of heaven right here on earth.

Alec – what is it like for you as a young person who comes to worship and goes to LOGOS? What activities do you do here or at LOGOS that make you feel better than anywhere else you could be at the moment?

Anna – how about you? As a LOGOS youth, tell us what the kingdom of heaven seems like to you, when you're enjoying yourself at LOGOS. Anyone else? More later.

Thank you for sharing. That's how we can shout it from the rooftops – the kingdom of heaven is here, among us.

Come, let your hearts sail like the birds of the air, experience the life-changing connections of being in a community of faith, discover hidden blessing more valuable than anything in all the world, and give and receive the embrace of God as lived out through the church. Shout it out from the rooftops. And as we do so, may God continue to reveal the kingdom of heaven to us. And may we be inspired and guided to help make known the kingdom of heaven to others – here at church, out in the community, and especially in our homes and with our loved ones. Amen.

***Pastoral Prayer - based on a prayer by St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. (1033-1109)***

O Merciful God, fill our hearts, we pray you, with the graces of your Holy Spirit, with love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

Teach us to love those who hate us, to pray for those who despitefully use us, that we may be your children, our Father, who make your sun to shine on the evil and on the good and send rain on the just and on the unjust.

As we encounter both just and unjust, O Lord, help us to do so with discerning hearts, that we not be led astray.

We pray, too, for those in need of your care, O Lord, that they would receive healing, maintain hope, and live in the promise of your glory.

For you, O God, have revealed to us the splendor and power of your glory in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and given to us your living Word that we might follow Jesus in all that we do.

Help us to do so now, even as we follow in the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive  
our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**