

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like
Mathew 13: 31-33 44-52

I once heard a story about a Methodist minister who died and was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Just ahead of him is a guy who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter says to this cool guy, "Welcome to the Kingdom of Heaven. Identify yourself so that I may know whether or not to allow you through the gate." The guy replies, "I'm Jack, a retired airline pilot from Houston." Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the pilot, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom." The pilot goes into Heaven with his robe and staff. Next, it's the minister's turn so he marches right up and booms out, "I am Reverend Bob, pastor of First UMC for the last 43 years." Saint Peter consults his list and finally says to him "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom." The minister is not happy. "Wait just a minute. That man was a pilot and he gets a silken robe and golden staff and I get only cotton and wood. How can this be?" Saint Peter replied. "Over here - we go by results. When you preached - people slept. When he flew, people prayed."

It is funny how sermon illustrations seem to show up just at the right time. A form of that story I just shared with you was emailed to me and just as I was ready to hit the delete button I changed my mind or perhaps the Holy Spirit changed my mind and I decided to keep it for future use, for such a time as this. The same thing happened some time ago as I sorted through the pile of junk mail on our kitchen counter that keeps the post office in business. One of the things was a flyer from Planet Fitness, a national chain of fitness centers where people exercise and work out to get in shape or stay in shape. Just as I was ready to throw it in the trash their advertising slogan caught my eye- "Welcome to Planet Fitness, home of the judgment free zone".

Since we have been learning about heaven the past few weeks, I thought it seemed to fit. So, if you don't like the sermon today you can blame the post office. Like it or not, the truth is that there are some similarities and stark contrasts between the kingdom of heaven and that place where tens of thousands of people go to work out every day.

The six parables we just heard all center around a simile, a literary device that compares two different things. They can help us understand concepts and ideas that may be otherwise difficult to comprehend. The kingdom of heaven is an abstract thing, something we can't readily see with our eyes, so Jesus compares it to common things like seeds, yeast, treasure, a merchant, a dragnet and the head of a household to bring a picture into view. We can learn much from them.

The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large tree. Both started out small and grew into something large. **The kingdom of heaven is growing.** It started with 11 disciples and has now grown to millions of followers of Jesus Christ. It continues to grow so that there will always be room for one more soul. The other thing we see is that it is useful for birds to nest in its branches. The kingdom of heaven will be more than a grove of mustard trees that all look alike. We will come back to that in a moment.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that allows a small bit of flour and water to be transformed and grow, there is that word again, into something useful for feeding hungry stomachs. The kingdom of heaven is transformed people, useful people that are growing in faith and serving a divine purpose of overcoming spiritual and physical hunger in the world. **The kingdom of heaven is useful.**

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field or merchant seeking beautiful pearls. In the parable they were things that people desired so much that they literally sold everything they owned to buy them. **The kingdom of heaven is costly.** It is costly, but it cannot be purchased with dollars or gold. In fact, it is not even up for sale. Jesus already purchased it by shedding his blood on the cross at Calvary. The question is do we desire it enough to give up ourselves for it too?

The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that gathered fish of every kind. Scientists tell us that there are over 20,000 different species of fish in the ocean. From the tiniest minnow to the largest whale, they range in size, color, shape, and demeanor. **The kingdom of heaven is diverse.**

The kingdom of heaven is like Planet Fitness. At Planet Fitness you are issued an electronic tag that tells the person at the front counter that you have paid your membership fee and are entitled to enter and use the facility. You may only enter through one door and if you forget your badge, if your membership has expired or you try to use someone else's ID you will be denied entry. And just as the airline pilot and the Methodist minister discovered, a credential is required at the gate of heaven as well. In a way a photo ID will be needed but the picture on it will not be our own but that of Jesus. If the gatekeeper, who by the way is not St Peter but Jesus, sees that we look like Him, not physically but in our thoughts, actions and deeds, the door will be opened.

As we learned last week, the earthly kingdom of heaven and the spiritual kingdom of heaven are closely related. What we do here and now affects what will happen there later. Or to look at it a different way if you just show up at the gym, take a quick glance at all the different exercise machines but choose not to use them chances are good you will leave there looking no different than when you came. And when you step on the scale there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the only person to blame will be yourself because you had the same opportunity as everyone else to use the machines but chose not to. Physical fitness and spiritual fitness do not come without effort. Spiritual growth comes through the disciplines of prayer, fasting and Scripture.

The kingdom of heaven is like Planet Fitness. People are there from all walks of life. It doesn't matter what color your skin is, what part of town you live in, what kind of automobile you drive or whether you are wearing gym shorts or sweatpants, although rumor has it that those wearing black and gold might move to the front of the line. The kingdom of heaven is diverse.

The kingdom of heaven is not like Planet Fitness. Planet Fitness claims to be a judgment free zone, but Jesus seems to indicate in verses 47-50 that heaven certainly is not. Much like wheat and weeds and sheep and goats, Jesus will separate the good fish from the bad. The good news is that we can choose what kind of fish we want to be.

We can choose whether we want to live as wheat or weeds, as sheep or goats. We can choose to allow Jesus to govern our lives or allow His enemy to do so. What we cannot do is choose to do both. Jesus only mentions two kinds of baskets in His parable, one for good fish and one for the bad.

Though the 13th chapter of Mathews Gospel is probably not one of our favorite places to turn in the Scriptures, it is one that we dare not ignore or overlook. My hope is that we have learned much about heaven the past few weeks. Perhaps we have learned even more about Jesus and ourselves. I know I have. Like the last parable of the master of the house, we have looked at the old with eyes for the new. God is always doing something new, and as part of the kingdom of heaven we must do the same. I pray we will continue to learn and grow in our faith together in the days to come. Amen