

July 26, 2020 The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 17, Year A Pastor Amanda L. Warner
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

A couple of months ago, I had a dream that I was in heaven. But here's the weird thing. Heaven didn't look anything like heaven the way it's described in the Bible, or portrayed in the movies, or the way I've read about heaven in some books.

There were no clouds. There were no angels. There was no bright light. There were no streets paved with gold. I saw no lamb, no jeweled walls with open gates, no river with healing water, no garden of Eden beauty. It had nothing that my life experience has taught me to expect of heaven.

When I was 10 years old my grandparents, who, up until that point in my life had lived near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, moved to Connecticut to be closer their only child, my mother, and her family. I remember them looking for houses all over the central Connecticut area, searching for the perfect place for them to settle for their retirement.

I was so excited. My beloved grandma and grandpa were going to be minutes away, not ten hours away. Thanks to their and my parents' willingness to travel, I saw a lot of my grandparents during my first 10 years of life. Every couple of months, either they or we would make the trip, either they would come east or we would go west, so that we could see each other.

I had grown up with my grandparents as a huge part of my life in spite of the many miles between us, but still, I knew that with them living in Connecticut, they would be an even bigger part of my life, and I couldn't wait. But they just couldn't find the right house. There weren't a lot of houses on the market and those that were on the market didn't stay there long. While they were considering the merits of a particular house, it would be sold right out from under them, before they could say yes or no.

The time was getting closer and closer to my Grandpa's retirement, the time when they planned to sell their house in Pennsylvania and move, and they still didn't have a place to live.

Finally, one day, they were in their real estate agent's office and they saw a picture of a house that looked familiar. It looked familiar because it was a house in my neighborhood. In fact, it was across the street and three houses away from my house. They asked their real estate agent about it. How much was it? Could they go and see it?

Not a lot of time passed between the moment they realized that house was on the market to the moment that they were signing on the dotted line, buying a house that was, for all practical purposes, right across the street from ours.

For me, it was a dream come true. My grandparents were right across the street. No one had to drive me to go and see them. Anytime I wanted I could run across the street and spend some time with them. I stopped every day on my way home from my school bus stop. I would have snack with them and we would talk about our days. My sister and I had sleep overs there. We trick or treated at their house. We saw them almost every single day, unless they were traveling or we were, although, we often traveled together.

For all of us, their home was a second home.

And when they were older, when I had gone away to college, to seminary, to the home I made with Britton after we were married, my parents could more easily help to take care of my grandparents as they aged, than they could have even if they had lived on the other side of town.

And I still saw them a lot, for as long as they lived. When I went home, for school breaks, for summers, for vacations, and once I lived in Connecticut again, just for visits, for a long time, when I went home, I had two homes to go to, my parents' house and my grandparents' house, both places where I had grown up.

When I had that dream, that dream about heaven, that was where I found myself. I found myself in my grandparents' house.

I must admit, I was surprised. Even in the dream, I was surprised. There were other people there, and we were all kind of surprised that that was what heaven was like.

My grandparent's house was not glamorous. It was not particularly large. It was nothing like what you would see on HGTV. It was their home and they loved it and took care of it and were proud of it, but there was nothing about its appearance that would make you say, "This. This is heaven."

The people I was there with, some who I knew and some who I didn't, talked about that. We knew it was heaven, but we also acknowledged that it was not what we had been expecting.

But still, we weren't disappointed. We were surprised, but not disappointed. Heaven had not turned out to be a letdown. Physically, the house was exactly the way that I remembered it from when my grandparents lived there except for one thing. When you looked out of the kitchen window, you saw, not their small deck and small backyard, that ended in some pine trees and, if not for the pine trees, would have looked into one of their neighbor's backyards.

Instead it looked out on a beautiful mountain range. The view was heavenly, so that might have been one of the clues that this was heaven.

But the main reason that I knew that my grandparents' house was heaven, was that I wasn't worried. I wasn't worried about anything at all. I was completely at peace.

Now, I had this dream at the very beginning of May, when, in my waking life, I was very worried about many things. I was worried about the Coronavirus pandemic sweeping through our state. At that time, Massachusetts was still third in the nation in cases and in Covid-19 deaths.

I was worried about people who were sick and people who were grieving. I was worried about my kids and their schooling as we were in the throes of online learning. I was worried about the economy. I was worried about healthcare workers and other essential workers. I was worried about things we were missing. I was worried about people we weren't able to see. I was worried about what reopening would look like for our state. I was worried about our church. I was learning more every day, about the dangers of some of the things that we do as central parts of our communal gatherings, the dangers of things like communal singing and unison speaking, and even just breathing the same air as other people for extended periods of time indoors. I was worried about communion and First Communion. I was worried and I was sad and then I had a dream about heaven.

In that dream, I was in a place made sacred by the love I had given and received there. I was in a place where I had always been welcome. I was in a place where I had always been heard. I was in a place where I could take my troubles, as a child, as a teenager, as a college student, as a young adult, as a young wife and mother, and find solace.

I was in a place that had always been one of comfort for me, and in that place, I found heavenly peace.

In my dream, though the people who joined me in my grandparents' house were perfectly happy to be there, and knew, like I did, that it was heaven and it was enough, because of the overwhelming sense of peace that went along with being there, but still, it was a surprise. It was kind of ordinary. Like I said, there was nothing particularly special or extraordinary about the house itself. It was a simple house, full of simple things, loved and cared for, but not lavishly furnished or glamorous in itself.

It was the kind of house that Jesus might have told a parable about. Because Jesus told parables about simple and ordinary things. Things that the very first

people who heard them might have said, “Oh, yes, I can imagine that. I can picture that. I can relate to that.”

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.”

The farmers who heard him might have said, “Yes, that’s the smallest seed that I have ever seen.”

And then they might have marveled anew at the idea of so small a thing becoming so large that it could give refuge, sanctuary, peace, safety, a home, to so many birds of the air. Maybe they had never thought about it before but, when Jesus mentioned it, they thought, “Yes, it’s amazing that so small a thing could contain so much.”

Maybe they thought, “Is he saying that kingdom of heaven, God’s kingdom, starts small?”

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.”

Yeast is such a tiny thing, but it transforms the bread that you are making. You mix it with an overwhelming amount of flour, and because that yeast is worked in, kneaded in with all of the flour, the bread is able to rise.

And the women who were there, who heard him say that, might have thought, “Yes, it is amazing that such a small thing works its way through the entire loaf of bread, and, rather than being overwhelmed by the flour, transforms it.”

The kingdom of heaven is like something that permeates everything and changes everything. It’s like new eyes to see, new ears to hear, new priorities to shape our lives, to make us move through the world differently and lift it up.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure and a pearl.”

The dreamers in the crowd might have said, “Yes, I understand. I’ve been dreaming of that “strike it rich” moment my whole life.”

Like people who dream of the winning lottery ticket in our time, some people have always dreamed of that big moment, that they would find treasure unearned, and when they would, without anyone guessing what they were up to, claim the

treasure as their own, give up everything else that they had to possess it, would make the small investment to gain the big prize, that would transform their lives.

Because that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's the big prize, it's the thing that's worth having above all other things, even though Jesus knew and, maybe right away and maybe eventually, his hearers knew that the kingdom that Jesus talked about was not actually earthly riches, but still something that transformed you, transformed your life, transformed your circumstances, that changed your life in this life and that gave you new hope for life after death.

Indeed, a treasure, for those who had eyes to see it. For those who have ears to hear it.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net filled with fish, drawn ashore and sorted."

And the fishermen who heard him must have thought, "Ah, yes. That makes sense. I do that every day. I fill my net with fish and then I sort them. I take whatever comes, and it's not until later that I decide what I'm going to keep and what I'm not."

Maybe God is like that too. Maybe God invites all in, and then waits until later to sort it all out, who is belongs there and who does not. Maybe I have a place in this net too.

Maybe they asked themselves, "I wonder what I need to do, what I need to be, how I need to live to be a part of this kingdom, where I have already been given a place?"

I used to laugh at the beginning of the last paragraph of this series of parables. Jesus said, "Have you understood all this?"

They answered, "Yes."

I used to laugh. I used to be skeptical. I used to say, "Sure they understood." They said, "Yes," like this, while shaking their heads, "No."

But maybe, they did understand. Maybe the point of the parables was that they were close to home, things the original hearers understood, things that they thought about every day, things that they touched with their hands, things that they did and things that they dreamed about every day.

I know that Jesus wasn't trying to confuse them. And I know that Jesus isn't trying to confuse us.

He was taking what was old, familiar, comfortable, and filling it with new meaning, so that every time people threw out seed at planting time, or saw birds nesting in the fields, or baked bread for their families' dinners, or dreamed of unexpected riches, or threw their nets into the sea, they would remember that God was everywhere, that God was with them, that the kingdom of heaven had come near, that God's presence imbued every moment of their lives, and because of that, they could live in a different way, with less worry, with less fear, with more generosity, with more peace, with more hospitality, with more love, because the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure, and once you possess it, once you are in that net, your life is transformed, everything else is put into perspective and you can be a part of the transformation of the world.

In small ways and in big ways, all of it is kingdom work.

So, the parables tell us that the kingdom of heaven is familiar and transformative. The kingdom of heaven is like our dreams and our work. The kingdom of heaven permeates everything. The kingdom of heaven takes what we know, what is already a part of our lives, and tells us something new about it, something that shapes us, changes us, gives us hope, and leads us to seek God, to seek the holy, in all that we see, in all that we do, in all who we meet.

Maybe my dream, from a time when I was scared, was supposed to be a parable for me.

The kingdom of heaven is like my grandparents' house. The kingdom of heaven is like a place of welcome, of joy, of love, of peace. A place where you don't have to worry.

The kingdom of heaven is like that. Thanks be to God. Amen.