

God's Reign and God's Dragnet

What does the reign of God look like in the midst of this pandemic? It's a question to ponder as we have encountered for the last two Sundays, and today, these parables of Jesus in Matthew's 13th chapter—all having to do with this very question. What does the reign of God look like in the midst of this pandemic? It's what I want to address this morning.

By the way, many translations of the Bible use the term "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." Such is the case in the passage of Matthew's gospel that we just read. Jesus tells a number of parables in which he says "The kingdom of heaven is like"

- treasure hidden in a field;
- a merchant in search of find pearls;
- a net that was thrown into the sea.

And in earlier verses, the kingdom of heaven in like:

- a mustard seed;
- yeast;
- a sower who went out to sow.

In our day and age, in our 21st century context, kingdom is really a rather antiquated term. While we have used it a lot within the vocabulary of the church, it is not used much in our contemporary setting. When it is used, it's more often for a fairly narrowly conscribed population or grouping—like the Kingdom of Jordan, or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or closer to home, how about the Magic Kingdom as in Disneyland or Disney World.

And many of us, when we think of a monarchy with a king or queen, Queen Elizabeth II of England comes to mind. But what is she really queen of? Is she the sovereign over a kingdom? When I looked it up I found that she is the monarch over 16 countries that together are not so much as a kingdom, but rather the Commonwealth.

Perhaps a more helpful use of kingdom in this day and age is within biology in which there are 6 kingdoms described, including plants, animals, fungi, protists, archaeobacteria, and eubacteria. But even this use of the word kingdom is not very relatable to our current sociological context.

So when we read in the Bible about the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, we may not get the full impact that is behind those words. Professor Anna Case-Winters has suggested that a more helpful translation of the original Greek for us today is to talk about the reign of God. She points out, "The Greek word usually translated as 'kingdom,' . . . is actually a verbal noun derived from [a verb] which means 'to rule or reign.' Because the English words 'rule' or 'reign' are also verbal nouns, they are actually closer renderings of the original Greek." So she submits that reign of God is the most accurate and helpful term for us today. (*Matthew, (Belief: a theological commentary on the Bible)* © 2015 Anna Case-Winters, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 175)

So again, the question we're pondering is what does the reign of God look like in the midst of this pandemic?

A recurring theme throughout the Bible's new testament is that the reign of God is already here, in our midst, and that we're part of it.

In these last three parables that Jesus tells in this chapter, the first is one in which Jesus compares the reign of God to a treasure in a field that is buried, sold, and bought again. And in the second parable Jesus compares the reign of God with a merchant who is in search of fine pearls who ends up buying the most precious one with all he has. Each of these parables drives home that to be part of God's reign is absolutely priceless. It is worth everything we have, our highest priority.

While this may not be a new or novel idea, it may still make it seem out of our reach. Because is everything I have actually enough? That's where this last of these three parables comes into play. It has more to it, with several layers of meaning.

This last parable is a fishing parable. Now those of you who know me know that I am not an angler. I've been fishing a few times in my life, but it never caught on for me to pursue as an avocation or hobby. Many of you do fish since we live in a place that is known for it's blue ribbon fishing streams and rivers. Most of the fishing around here is fly fishing, undoubtedly the most beautiful and artistic of methods of fishing. There's also fishing with bait and lures in rivers and lakes. And in the winter, for the most hearty, there is ice fishing. All of these methods use hooks to catch individual fish.

Many commercial fishing methods use small weighted nets that are cast into the water in order to catch a school of fish together to haul aboard a boat to then sell. This was one of two main ways that fish were caught commercially in the time of Jesus. It was called targeted fishing. The other method is the one that is referenced by Jesus in this parable.

In this method a very large weighted net is cast into the water that goes very deep into the water, if not all the way down, and is then pulled or dragged by one or more boats to catch everything in its path. This is dragnet fishing. When this method was employed, the dragnet did not in any way discriminate in what it did and did not snag. It basically caught everything in its path, fish of all kinds, weeds, trash, and other objects. Quite in contrast to targeted net fishing, dragnet fishing included everything.

In this parable the dragnet is cast into the water and after it is full it is pulled in and taken ashore. On shore the catch is divided into the good catch that is saved in baskets and the bad which is cast and thrown away. This is an image that would be been immediately understandable to Jesus' disciples and listeners.

On the surface we might be tempted to think that this is like the reign of God in that in the end, after everything has been dragged in, the good are saved and those who are not good are not saved. The good go to heaven, and well, those not deemed good don't. Have you heard this before? It certainly resonates with the ways of the world. You get what you earn and you earn what you get. We all get dragged in in the dragnet and if we're good we get saved.

But that's not how this parable ends. Like he does in so many other places, Jesus gets our attention with something that we think we understand and then lays a whole new meaning on top of it. Since this is a parable, every part of the story has a meaning to it. So the net—that dragnet—is like the reign of God that catches, as we read, "fish of every kind." Fine and good, but what about the other stuff that was caught in that dragnet because remember it was a lot more than just fish. Well biblical scholars have pointed out that this translation of "fish of every kind" is inaccurate. There is no Greek word for fish used in this parable. The word used is more accurately rendered as every kind was caught. Everything was caught in that dragnet which is like the reign of God.

It's when we get then to the sorting through all that was caught up in that dragnet that the parable takes a new twist. And that twist is that when the reign of God is considered at the end of the age, it is angels that will come out and separate the evil from the righteous. Who makes the determination of who are the righteous and who are not? Is it you? Is it me? Is it any person? Any human? The word we read here is that the *angels* will make that determination. And what are angels but emissaries or ambassadors of God. Our sovereign God is the one and only one who makes that distinction, that determination, or that judgement.

The essence of this parable is that all are caught up in God's reign. No one is beyond God's grasp. And perhaps most importantly for us is that our destiny is in God's hands. It is not for us to judge. It is not for us to second-guess God. It is for us to live our lives as best we can in gratitude for the amazing love and grace of God.

Jesus' proclamation of God's reign being among us now as well as being fully realized in the future is a central message that Jesus preached over and over again across his ministry.

Again I want to quote from Dr. Anna Case-Winters in her summary on God's reign. She writes,

A complete reordering of life and relationships is commensurate with the coming of God's reign. . . . Jesus' deeds of power announce the reign of God by casting out the powers of evil, healing diseases, bringing good news to the poor, and restoring life in the face of death (Matt. 11:5) His ministry overturns expectations and embraces those at the margins—the poor the outcast, the powerless, the sick, and the sinful. Radical reorientation toward God's reign is not only about personal/individual lives but also about reordering religious, social, economic, and political life. The reign of God, as Jesus taught and lived it, proved such a threat to the status quo that religious and political powers conspired together to have him crucified. (*ibid.* p. 186)

I return to the question with which I began today: What does the reign of God look like in the midst of this pandemic?

First, as emphasized by Jesus in numerous parables, the reign of God is invaluable. It is priceless. It is worth everything. It is of incredible value. As God's people living through this pandemic, it follows that we demonstrate this truth of the value that God has placed on it. How can we live in any way other than to lift up the worth and value of all? How I live through this pandemic is not a matter of personal choice. It is not my decision alone how I choose to participate in the health and safety of my community. It is for me to muster everything in my choices to put the good of all ahead of all others.

This pandemic has been going on long enough that we know what behaviors bring this about. Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently. Wear a mask. And watch your distance to ensure adequate physical separation from others. Those of us in God's reign do this, not for ourselves alone, but for the community at large.

And second, in the reign of God, it is God alone who chooses. One of the insidious natures of a pandemic is that the coronavirus knows no distinctions. It is an equal opportunistic virus that will strike wherever it can. Again, if we put the community ahead of individual, our behavior in God's reign is motivated by the common good.

The reign of God in the midst of this pandemic compels us to act and live with the same grace extended to all that God has extended to us. Thanks be to God for God's reign.