

Sermon – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Romans 8:26-39

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

8 Pentecost – Year A

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“Hide and Seek”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The kingdom of heaven is like a wooden articular church in the Mala Fatra mountains of northern Slovakia. 300 years old, this particular church was built by Lutherans during the reign of Charles VI, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary, among other things. These were dark days for adherents of the Reformation in central Europe. While the Roman Catholic rulers found it necessary to appease the Lutherans to some degree, in order to secure their help in fending off invaders, they didn't want to be too nice to those who defied the authority of Rome. So they let them build churches, but under harsh conditions. Without getting into all of the strictures placed upon them, the Lutherans were only allowed to build churches of perishable materials. No soaring stone structures for these Christians; no metal nails, for that matter. The hope of the authorities was that if the Lutherans built churches out of perishable materials, prone to rot and collapse, the Christian communities that worshipped in these structures would rot and collapse, too. Imagine the surprise Emperor Charles would have felt if he could have been there a few weeks ago when some of us gathered in this wooden church in Istebné to celebrate Holy Communion, presided over by our own Pastor Dave Wegner. The church not only survived the harsh reality of ecumenical discord, but outlasted the steel and concrete structures of later communist rule. Throughout much of their history, the Christians of Istebné celebrated communion, much to their embarrassment, with a simple wooden chalice. No gold or silver for their communion ware.

But as one of their pastors was wont to say, better to have wooden cups and golden hearts than to have golden cups and wooden hearts. After all, the sacrament is not defined by the value of the containers but by the priceless gifts contained within. Yes, the kingdom of heaven is like an old wooden church in Slovakia. It might not look like much. It might contain suffering and shame, but within these is the kingdom itself, already present and active in the lives of the baptized – even if it doesn't look like much at the time.

2. Jesus could have told this parable; it fits perfectly with the string of parables in our gospel reading today. The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed that holds within it room for all of the birds of the air to nest. The kingdom is like yeast, kneaded lovingly by a woman into the flour until it is leavened for growth. The kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field, so valuable that it makes the whole field priceless. The kingdom is like a pearl of such worth that a man would give up everything in order to obtain it. The kingdom is like a net dragged in the sea, collecting everything in its wake. The kingdom, Jesus wants to make clear, is full of surprises. The kingdom might not look like much, but in its smallness, its ordinariness, its seeming worthlessness, the kingdom is *already* present and active, transforming this world through the word and work of Jesus Christ, buried pervasively and close to the surface of everyday life.
3. As close to the surface as the kingdom is in our lives, it is hidden. Jesus makes this clear. Seeds and yeast, buried treasure and swimming fish – the kingdom can be hard to find. In our daily to-do lists, in the constant grind and pressures of this life, it can evade us. Even more, in the sin and suffering, the disease and death of this world, the kingdom can seem incredibly difficult to discern. Where, we no doubt find ourselves asking from time to time, is God in all of this? Where is God when dread diagnoses and deep depressions enter in? Where is the kingdom we long to find? The problem, perhaps, is that we are looking for the wrong sort of kingdom, the sort of kingdom we

would build if it were up to us. We imagine that if God is at work, all will be easy. Or if not easy, we project the kingdom out into the future; yes, things might be hard now, but better things await us in a heaven that is yet far off. Jesus' parables, however, belie these notions. The kingdom is not something for which we wait, even if we yearn for its fullness; it is baked into the bread of this world, buried close to the surface in the fields of our sufferings. The kingdom is present now – here and now – today. We don't need grand cathedrals or golden cups to behold the riches of Christ. We, in and by the gracious waters of baptism, are already called and chosen; we, by the work of the Spirit, are already held close to the heart of God; we, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are already fully alive, for we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, an indelible mark that will not wash off or wear away. Simple water and plain words conveying the fullness of the kingdom, bringing the saving work of Christ into our lives today.

4. The kingdom is, in fact, most clearly revealed in the most hidden of manners. Who would have imagined that the death of a Jewish rabbi would be the way in which God most clearly reveals the breadth and depth of the kingdom of God – a kingdom that neither places demands upon us nor waits for our sin and suffering to pass. No, in the suffering and death of Jesus, God has entered all the way in, all the way down, into our sin and suffering and death – both to redeem us from sin, suffering, and death *and* to gift us with the promise that God is with us in the midst of all we endure. To proclaim to us the grace to know that God is with us; nothing can therefore stand against us.
5. It is a hidden promise indeed, difficult to see, particularly when death is stalking God's people. We have had too much of death this week, in our congregation and the wider community. With Paul we ask, what then are we to say about these things? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or

sword? Will cancer, or ALS, or accident, or depression, or suicide, or the grief we feel in the face of such things separate us from the love of Christ? No. *No*. For we are baptized into the death of Jesus, and Jesus is alive in us, sustaining and supporting us, even in the midst of death, be it our own or that of one dearly loved. For we, like Paul, are convinced in faith that not even death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

6. It's true. The kingdom might not look like much to us, not when the forces of sin and suffering, disease and death are on the march. And yet buried within our suffering is the love of God. Baked into our lives is the grace of the kingdom. Hidden within our dying is the very life of Christ that shows forth the promise of God that cannot be taken from us, that empowers us to live with joy and hope regardless of circumstance. Mustard seeds and buried treasure might not look like much, but in such small, ordinary things, God has planted the kingdom in this world, here and now. Sometimes it looks like a simple wooden church. Always the kingdom looks like the church – not towering steeples but steadfast sisters and brothers, supporting one another through all things. So today, come, and find the promises in simple bread and ordinary wine. Come, and find Jesus; he hiding, but he's not doing a very good job of it. He's told you where you can find him. In the sacrament, in your life by the power of the Spirit, in the crucified Lord of heaven and earth. It's true; we are built of simple, perishable materials. But simple, perishable materials – like you and me – are the things with which God does the best work. What once seemed hidden has now been found, and you have been found, too. Christ has found you and will never, never, let you go.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.