

Lectionary 17A 2017, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, July 30, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

To what shall we compare the Kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is like driving down the road and suddenly seeing a sign at the gas station, "\$1.00 a gallon," and filling up your tank for \$15.00.

The kingdom of heaven is like finding an unused lottery ticket on the street, scratching off the numbers and discovering you've won \$1,000.

The kingdom of heaven is like a surprise birthday party in which you had no idea of the plans, but when it happens all your family and best friends are there and you have a great time.

The kingdom of heaven is like searching for a new place to live, spending hours and hours walking through dozens of houses, and then one day you walk into one and instantly know its going to be your future home, and you sign a mortgage and move in.

The kingdom of heaven is like a young waiter serving a meal to former basketball star Charles Barkley and discovering that your tip is having your college education paid for. This is actually true and was reported in the news this past week.

The kingdom of heaven is like a woman named Oseola McCarty, a washerwoman who charged \$10 to do a load of wash. When she was 91 she gave the University of Southern Mississippi \$150,000 for a scholarship fund for students who otherwise couldn't afford a college education. Since Miss McCarty's gift the scholarship fund has grown to almost half a million dollars due to others inspired by her story.

The kingdom of heaven is like an investment strategy of buying one share of every stock listed on the New York Stock Exchange and after twenty years keeping those that have made money and burning the shares which haven't.

The kingdom of heaven is like a foster child who goes from home to home and when she grows up she becomes a scientist and discovers a cure for cancer.

The kingdom of heaven is about surprise. The Lancaster Newspaper publishes thank you letters from time to time. Quite often someone is surprised and pleased by someone else's actions. Denise from West Hempfield Township wrote recently: "I just wanted to say thank you to a young man named Jay. My daughter's friend was holding her small card case Saturday evening and accidentally dropped it along Duke Street. They didn't realize it was missing until Sunday morning. Her license, debit card and \$15 were inside. My daughter retraced her steps and didn't find it, so we thought all was lost. She froze the card and applied for a replacement license. Then my daughter was on Facebook and noticed a request and a message from someone she didn't know. It was Jay. He found the case shortly after it was dropped. He found my daughter via social media (using the information on her license) and messaged her immediately. (Unfortunately, she didn't check her messages until a couple of days later.) He sent her a very

nice message ending with “I hope you are safe.” What an awesome young man! Thank you, Jay. It warms my heart to experience firsthand the goodness and kindness in people. “The art of being kind is all the world needs.” Sometimes the letters express public thanks in response to an anonymous random act of kindness. Deb, from Mount Joy and her mother Alice from Columbia wrote, “My mother and I went out to eat dinner at Silver Spring Family Restaurant. When it came time to pay our bill, the waitress told us our bill was already paid, including tip. We would like to thank the person or persons who paid our bill for their generous act of kindness. It touched our hearts deeply.”

Has anything like that ever happened to you? Totally at random, without expecting it or deserving it? That’s what the kingdom of heaven is like. We don’t deserve it. We really shouldn’t even expect it. But God in his goodness and graciousness surprises us with his goodness, mercy and grace. That’s what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The kingdom of heaven is like something that starts out small and insignificant. Jesus talked about a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds, and about leaven, or yeast, in a batch of bread. Anyone who’s baked bread knows just a little package of dried yeast will quickly multiply and turn a batch of stiff flour dough into a light, airy batch of bread dough that when freshly baked is an aroma just this side of heaven. One Christian, one small congregation, can be yeast in the world in ways never imagined. Your ministry, your discipleship doesn’t even have to be noticed by the rest of the world. Just remember your sacrifice of love and service is like the aroma of freshly baked bread wafting its way up to heaven. But I also know that printed on every yeast package is an expiration date. It says, “best if used by such and such a date.” Yeast left in the refrigerator doesn’t do any good.

The kingdom of heaven is like the most precious thing you can possibly imagine, and once you find it, you do everything in your power to make sure you never lose it. I love the little parable about the man who finds the treasure in the field. You know, it is kind of strange, and that’s sometimes the way of the kingdom. After all, the man didn’t own the field in which he found the treasure. It really belonged to someone else. But he was willing to sell everything he owned in order to buy the whole field. That’s commitment, selling everything you possess, just so you can have the treasure. The kingdom of heaven, though it often comes as a surprise, also generates a great deal of commitment. Kingdom treasure is not cheap, though it is freely given. You remember how Jesus puts it, don’t you, “unless you take up your cross and follow me, you can not be my disciple.” The cross of discipleship is the purchase price of that treasure bearing kingdom field.

The kingdom of heaven is like sending out invitations to the first 10 people listed under each letter of the alphabet in the phone book. You invite them to a party. Those who show up have a wonderful time; eating and drinking and dancing. Those who don’t respond, well they missed a great party. That’s like the kingdom. Jesus invites everybody. Some respond. Others don’t. The net Jesus casts out is far and wide. Like the big net the church catches lots of fish. We are a mixed group of fish here at church. Like the mixed field of wheat and weeds in last week’s parable. The point is that God somehow sorts it all out and that’s not really our job. Our job is to keep throwing that net out there and issuing invitations. I once heard of a congregation using an evangelism technique of sending out a postcard to everyone of the same zip code for the church.

I have my doubts as to its effectiveness, but I have to admit it does sound biblical. The net on that boat is just cast over the side and drags in all sorts of fish.

The simplest explanation is still the best. After all that's how Jesus speaks of the kingdom, and because Jesus lives the kingdom belongs to him. His kingdom is always a surprise to us who don't deserve it. But when we find it, as we have, it's worth everything. It doesn't matter how small it may seem, after all it belongs to God. And to God, even those things that are small, like mustard seeds and yeast packets, and his children, grow into plants and bread and disciples fit for his kingdom. Amen.