

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 23-24, 2011
Matthew 13:44-52

“Have You Understood All These Things?”

Matthew 13 is filled with parables that Jesus told which shed light on what the kingdom of heaven is like. Over the last few weeks, we've heard parables about the sower and the seed, the wheat and the weeds, and now today we hear about treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great value, and the net of fish. And when he had finished all of these parables about God's kingdom, as well as others that were not included in our Gospel lessons (the mustard seed and the leaven, or yeast), Jesus concludes by asking his disciples a question: **“Have you understood all these things?”** (Matthew 13:51). “Do you get it? Do you grasp the truth of what I am telling you about the kingdom of heaven through these parables that I've told – the small beginnings of God's kingdom, the varied responses of people to it, its extraordinary worth and value, and the judgment that will finally take place? Do you comprehend all of this?” Surprisingly, at least to me, the disciples respond in the affirmative: **“They said to him, ‘Yes’”** (Matthew 13:51). I find this rather surprising because in most other instances when Jesus had instructed his disciples about important matters concerning God's kingdom and his plan of salvation, they didn't understand. In fact, it's pretty clear that they really didn't get it at all (cf. Matthew 16:21-23; Mark 9:33-37, 10:35-45; John 6:1-15, et al.). Truth be told, we wouldn't have gotten it, either. In fact, there is still much about the kingdom of heaven that we don't get, so we can't be too critical of those first disciples. But at least here, the disciples indicate that they did get it, and that their understanding about the kingdom of heaven has been immeasurably deepened through Jesus' parables. And so today's message, based on the Gospel lesson and Jesus' question, is entitled: “Have You Understood All These Things?” May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. Who hasn't dreamed about this? At the time of Jesus, political conditions in Palestine and the threat of invasion prompted people to put their valuables in the safest possible place: burying them! The man who stumbled upon the treasure willingly puts everything else he has in life into service to possess that treasure. There is this single-minded devotion to achieving his goal. The emphasis here is on the great value of what is discovered, not on what is given up or the struggle involved. And so it is with those who discover the incalculable and priceless treasure of salvation in Jesus Christ. They're not even looking for it, but upon finding it they use every resource at their disposal to possess it. Paul the apostle was one such person. He came upon this treasure suddenly, unexpectedly. Not only was he *not* looking for it; he was violently opposed to it. And yet, this is the same person who wrote: **“... I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him”** (Philippians 3:8-9a). This is the supreme treasure because it fully satisfies the need of the heart, and brings inner peace – peace in Christ which the world cannot give (John 14:27). Having received this treasure, are we – like that worker in the field – filled with joy and willing to place everything at our disposal for its sake? Have you understood all these things?

The kingdom of heaven is also like one pearl of great value. In contrast to those who stumble upon the treasure of God's kingdom by accident are those who are diligently searching and seeking for what is the

highest good in life, like that merchant in the Gospel lesson. In the ancient world, pearls were far beyond the purchasing power of the average person. They were obtained from the Persian Gulf or the Indian Ocean and fabulously priced. Again, it is the surpassing value and worth of possessing this treasure that causes a person to realign everything else in life. Again, there is a joyful and willing surrender of all that is inconsistent with possessing this treasure. Jesus and the gift of salvation in him is this priceless treasure. Have you understood all these things?

Like last Sunday's parable of the wheat and the weeds, the net of fish speaks of the final judgment; of a separating between good and bad, evil and righteous, and the destruction of evil. The good news of the kingdom of heaven and the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ is constantly "catching" people (cf. Luke 5:10), and that is what we are called to be doing now until that final day, always pointing people to Christ and the new life that we have through his life, death, and resurrection. In about a month's time, we will be casting a new net into the waters of our community through St. John's Arabic Mission. Led by Ibrahim Soliman, the first worship service will be held on Sunday, August 28, at 5 pm. In advance of this, we are looking for people who will lift up this new ministry in prayer that the Lord God would guide and bless it. We cannot look into hearts of others and distinguish between good and bad, evil and righteous. That is not our task, and so we leave it to the Lord at the final judgment. By God's amazing grace in Jesus, we rejoice now that we are **"... a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession..."** (Deuteronomy 7:6), and that in Jesus **"... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor power, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:37-39). This is our confidence, our faith, and our joy. Have you understood all these things?

Have you understood all these things? Like the disciples, we could say "Yes." But I think a better response would be to say with the father of the boy who had an unclean spirit, **"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"** (Mark 9:24). This side of heaven, we will never fully understand all there is to know about the kingdom of heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we do believe, and look forward to that day when, by God's grace, we no longer walk by faith, but by sight. And so we are those scribes Jesus talks about who are trained for the kingdom of heaven., scribes who having received this good news must now share it with others. God help us to do this, for Jesus' sake. Amen.