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"God's Rule"

Genesis 29:15-28 Romans 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Introduction to Genesis 29:15-28

After a dream of a ladder into heaven Jacob meets the woman of his dreams in Rachel. Seeing that dream become true however, involves a lot of hard labor, but for him, it is a labor of love. Hear the word of the Lord from Genesis 29:15-28.

Introduction to Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Apparently with the parable of the sower and the parable of the gardener Jesus was just getting started. This morning we will examine five more parables of Jesus. In the eyes of the world there is still an element of craziness to the realm that Jesus is describing. It was counter to the culture of his day and it still is. But it is God's realm. God's rule. God's rules. Hear the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52.

Let us pray. Open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our souls to sense your touch. Open our hearts to feel your love. Open our minds to receive your word.

In our Vacation Bible School we had a friendly competition between the girls and the boys to see which could bring the most canned goods for our Food Pantry. As each side cheered I heard shouts like "Girls rule." "Boys Rule." This morning we are going to focus on what our lives like when we submit to God's Rule.

Our country was founded on the foundation of not having a king, so the word kingdom does not translate as well for us. We are a country founded on laws, on the rule of law, on rules that we expect everyone to observe and obey. So this morning, rather than talk about the Kingdom of God I'm going to substitute talking about God's rule for and over and in our lives. When Jesus says the kingdom of God is like, I'm going to substitute the rule of God is like...

Those of you who are into Facebook know what it is to be "liked," on Facebook. If you post something that people like, they click on an icon of a "gig em" hand sign, (a up pointed thumb). Last Friday was my birthday and I got a lot of likes and Happy Birthday wishes, and for those of you who did so....thank you. It was a happy day. I'm now Medicare part B eligible!!!

In the 1952 presidential election, those who favored a particular candidate wore buttons that said, "I Like Ike." That expressed the same usage that we see on Facebook. People were saying that they agreed with what Ike stood for. They didn't want to BE Like Ike. They just Liked Ike.

In the 80's Gatorade came out with a commercial and a song that encouraged kids to dream of being "like Mike." (as in Michael Jordan) Those who used like in that way were saying that they wanted to dunk like Mike, even though most of them never would.

If you go to the candy aisle at Walgreens you will see a candy named "Mike and Ike." If you like, you can eat candy and like Mike AND Ike."

Those who, "Liked Ike," voted for him to elect him president. Those who wanted to be "like Mike" drank Gatorade. But those who like Jesus—and those who want to be like or live like Jesus ... are called to live like he lived and love like he loved—to love God and love one another and listen when he tells them what being and loving and living like him is "like." In this morning's gospel lesson we see 5 different images that Jesus used to describe what God's rule is LIKE.

God's rule is like a mustard seed. After two parables about the evils of weeds Jesus now uses a parable to say God's rule is LIKE a weed. Actually the mustard plant IS a weed. The mustard seed is small enough that it can fit under the tip of a fingernail. Yet, from the smallest seed grows a shrub as large as a tree. It is not just tall but is also wide. It was known as the poor man's fence providing shade and protection at no cost. It kept predators out and children in. The mustard plant was thick providing nesting places for birds that would brighten the yard with music and color and at the same time helped keep the insect population under control. The rule of God that Jesus describes brings comfort, protection, and safety for the family. It starts out small and grows fast. It is available to all, even the poorest of the poor.

God's rule doesn't look powerful. It doesn't have tanks or rockets or armies. God's rule is small and ordinary; it's full of peace-lovers and people who feed the poor. "(1)

Jesus follows this image with four more. In piling "like" upon "like" Jesus stacked story upon story showcasing how "priceless" God's rule was for persons who could grasp its truth. Jesus said, "God's rule is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

In Jesus' culture three measures of flour was about eighty pounds. This woman is not Martha Stewart whipping up a couple delicate exquisite little biscuits that together weigh less than a canary. No! She's emptying sixteen five-pound bags of flour into the biggest mixing bowl you've ever seen. She's pouring in forty-two cups of water! She's got a mass of dough on her hands that weigh over a hundred pounds! She's kneading this lump of dough, shaping it, pounding 100 pounds of it that had been influenced by just a little bit of yeast. That's what God's rule is LIKE. Again little things can have big results. God's rule may start small but it is destined to have a huge impact on our world.

Any goal that is worthy deserves and demands a commitment. An Olympic athlete must be committed to training; a great pianist must be committed to practicing ... scales.

After hearing a famous pianist, a lady said to him, "I would give anything to be able to play like that." He replied, "I'll bet you wouldn't give five minutes a day."

Another said to a master musician, "I would give my very life if I could play the way you do," and the musician replied, "That is precisely what it cost me, my life."

Jesus is saying that the rule of God is like a small seed or a pinch of yeast that will surprise you. As he continues, he shares about more surprises. God's rule is like a hidden treasure waiting to be found, like a priceless pearl worth all you have.

Today people spend money in hopes of winning the lottery. Mickey Rooney once said, "I lost \$2.00 at a racetrack one time, and I've spent about three million dollars trying to get it back." In Jesus' time people lived in the hope of finding treasure buried in a field. There were no offshore banks in the grand Caymans; no unnumbered accounts in Switzerland. People who wanted to secure their wealth buried it in the ground. It didn't gain any interest but at least it was secure. Unfortunately, some of these people died before reclaiming their wealth. So there it lay just waiting for someone to discover it.

The first treasure finder got lucky. Apparently he was digging or plowing in a field and found someone else's bank account! After unburying it he buries it again and goes and sells all he has to get enough to buy the whole field.

The second man is the opposite of lucky. He is very deliberate and painstaking in his efforts to locate fine pearls. He is not digging and hoping. He is specifically searching where pearls are known to be found, looking for the finest of all. Even though these two men's approaches are different, and their efforts quite unlike, one thing is true for both: the treasure, their discovery, is a marvelous gift, a great surprise and a cause for great joy.

Mel Fisher is the man who discovered a Spanish ship which had gone down in a hurricane off the Florida Keys centuries ago. Fisher became fascinated with hunting for lost treasure. Through his research he was able to determine about where the ship went down. He thought it would take him at least twelve weeks to find it. Twelve weeks turned into twelve years, and still there was no treasure. Finally, after sixteen years he discovered the treasure. It is believed to be worth four hundred million dollars.

This morning we embark on a search. At the end of our service we will elect a Co-pastor Nominating Committee. That committee will begin the process of diligently seeking Faith's next pastor. Like the man who looked for the pearl of great price I know they will work hard and search diligently. Maybe like the other man they'll get lucky! Maybe they'll experience some of both. Hopefully it won't take 16 years.

When a young man is smitten by love, he counts all other romantic relationships as worthless compared to knowing his beloved. He becomes like Jacob in our Old Testament lesson that had to serve seven additional years to be able to marry Rachel,

These fishermen are winnowing out the "clean" from the "unclean" fish. Although they had no knowledge of marine ecology, by returning all the "unclean" bottom-feeders to the sea, the Jewish fishermen were helping create a better environment for the "fins and scales" fish they were interested in harvesting.

The previous two parables were about men looking for priceless treasures. This one is about those who aren't looking for it. That's the way it was for C. S. Lewis. One day he was caught in God's net. He wasn't looking for God. In fact, as a convicted atheist he was doing his best to avoid God. Listen to his description:

"You must picture me alone in that room... night after night, feeling... the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. (Finally, in 1929) I gave in, and admitted that God was God; and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." (2)

Not everyone is all that happy to have been caught by God. But here we are in church anyway, still trying like Lewis to sort out how we got here in the first place: teenage conversion, a grandparent's fervent prayers or did we just find ourselves caught in God's net like Lewis did long ago, holding God off as long as we could and then finally giving in?

Living in God's rule giving in brings joy, real joy, deep joy, the kind that is always close to tears; like when a loved one dies and since she was suffering so much, we're happy that her suffering is over and she is now with all the saints and we say to everyone who comes to the funeral, "It's a blessing," and we really mean it even as we fight back the tears. This is real joy, deep joy when we feel life to the fullest. Here is the kind of joy that C. S. Lewis had in mind when he talks about his own conversion which he titled Surprised by Joy. "The word 'joy' is used by him in a special way and is not the same as happiness, gladness or pleasure. In fact, for Lewis it includes a measure of agony and grief, but if once experienced it is eagerly sought for again and again (3)

There was a man in Florida who used to wrestle alligators for tourists. One time after one of his performances a lady noticed he wore a string of alligator teeth around his neck. She said, "Oh that is sort of like wearing a string of pearls." He replied, "Not quite. Anyone can open an oyster."

Anyone can tear down a barn. It takes a carpenter to build one. Anyone can be religious. Living in God's rule is something else altogether. It requires commitment. It calls us to give our lives to Christ and submit to God's rule in our lives. It puts us among the people of God who have been faithful to Him across the centuries. It re-orders our priorities, what we think is important, what we are living for. It leads us to dedicate our lives, who we are, what we can do, our abilities, hopes, and dreams to God's rule. In the midst of this kind of commitment we make the most marvelous discovery. We find that even though we began thinking it would cost us a great deal, we discover suddenly that we have riches untold, beyond measure. We become overwhelmed by the value of the treasure we have found, the treasure of God's rule by observing God's rules.

When you find yourself living in God's rule you will find your true destiny which is worth more than anything. Finding out why you and I are here on this earth is "more precious than silver and more costly than gold more beautiful than diamonds." Being surprised by the growth of a mustard seed, the influence of a pinch of yeast, by treasure or the priceless pearl or being caught up in God's net is all about what it means to live in and come to LIKE living in .. and under ... God's rule.

Let's pray. Lord, surprise us. Spring up around us. Work your way into our lives. May we seek you and find you and be willing to let go of the things that hinder us from fully experiencing the joy of following where you lead so that we will be in your boat.

Lord, sometimes we do not know how to pray. Knowing that Jesus intercedes on our behalf we are emboldened to come before your throne of grace. We pray for those who are not seeking you or have not yet found you. Surprise them.

We pray for those who are in need...for children without shelter, like birds who have no place to nest. We pray for those who do not know where their next meal is coming from. We pray for those who live in fear of what is coming next. May your rule come and your will be done on earth as it is being done in heaven.

We pray for those who are fighting—for those who are fighting for their lives—for those who are fighting for others—for those who are ill, who are facing surgery, undergoing therapy, struggling in recovery, and for those whose journey is nearing an end and a new beginning. We especially pray for Margie Johnson, for Red Stanley, for Sam Tune and for those we now lift to you by name in this holy gathering.

We pray for the places in this world where your peace is not present. We pray for all of those in harm's way. We pray for the Place we call the Holy Land that is so torn apart. We pray for the places where missiles fly and fears flare.

We thank you for your love. We thank you that nothing can separate us from your love. We thank you that in everything you are working for our good as we live according to your purpose and follow your rules and submit to your rule.

We pray for missionaries who leave home to take the good news of the kingdom where it has yet to go. We pray for our mission that through us God will change lives and make disciples through the transforming love of Jesus. And the people said, "Amen."

(1) Michael Vinson, d365 7-21-14

(2) Edited by Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, "Conversions," Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 201-202.

(3) Kerr, Mulder, p. 199."