

Eyes Wide Open: Always at Work Matthew 13:31-33, 44-47

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We are about halfway through the year and about halfway through the month of July, so it seems as good a time as any to talk about New Year's Day, right? On New Year's Day 2020, Nancy Lee and I got together with one of our small groups, as we have for each New Year's Day for the past several years. We got together for what we call the "Annual One Word Collaborative." Each New Year's Day for the past several, we've met together to reveal to one another the one word that each of us has chosen to bring focus to each of our lives for the coming year. You can imagine the words that this small group would come up with, words like imagination, inspire, kindness, imagination, humility and nourish. My word for 2020 is *Clarity*. You know, like clear vision. Clarity, like seeing 20/20. With every fiber of my being and in every area of my life with my family, friends and with you all, I wanted to make this year, 2020, the year of seeing 20/20, a year of new vision and new possibilities. I was so excited to see everything differently, to see everything from a different perspective, and to look at this year in ways I'd never looked at a year in my life before.

Well, mission accomplished! By the middle of March, everything had changed. Suddenly, overnight for everyone of us, everything was different. We looked at every aspect of our lives, from healthcare to education to race relations to religion and politics, spirituality – all of it, very differently. We were seeing everything differently. We were looking at everything with eyes wide open.

We're three weeks into our series that we're calling "Eyes Wide Open." I think the mantra of the world that we left behind could be something like, "The more things change the more things stay the same." Not anymore. I think the new world that we've already stepped into could be summed up in the statement, "The more things change, the more they keep changing." In this new world, we're discovering the need to be even more aware of our surroundings

during a global pandemic, even more intentional about walking deeply into relationship with our neighbors near and far, people that we know and people that we do not know. Even more faithful in our response to the Holy Spirit's leading and guiding, oftentimes into places of discomfort, but knowing that we're never ever alone.

Our intention with "Eyes Wide Open" is to explore God's word as we examine powerful stories of people whose eyes were wide open to the endless possibilities of walking deeply with God. Today, I want to take us into Matthew's gospel, where Jesus uses a series of parables, short stories, to help us be even more aware of how the kingdom of God, how the kingdom of heaven is emerging, unfolding all around us.

In Matthew 13, Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven as a present reality, the kingdom of heaven constantly emerging, always unfolding. That's part of the ongoing, creative work that God does in the world. Since the beginning of the year, and certainly in the past several weeks, a lot of us might have wondered where, how or even if God is moving. We could certainly be forgiven for wondering where, how or if the kingdom of heaven is visible in these times. But Jesus used parables, ordinary stories, to point to the extraordinary presence of the kingdom of heaven in our midst. Short stories about tiny seeds, a pinch of yeast, buried treasure, beautiful pearls, fishing nets. These were all Jesus needed to remind his followers that God is always at work, continually calling us into the powerful mission of the kingdom of heaven, here, now and everywhere.

Friends, the good news is that we get to be part of that mission in the world today, to be part of the momentum of revealing the kingdom of heaven through our lives everyday. And just as a sidebar, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are synonymous. It's generally understood that Matthew used the phrase kingdom of heaven because the Jewish audience held the name of God with such reverence that they avoided using his name. Here's how Matthew recorded Jesus' teaching:

³¹ "...The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches."

³³ Jesus also used this illustration: "The Kingdom of

Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough. ⁴⁴ *The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field.* ⁴⁵ *Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls.* ⁴⁶ *When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!* ⁴⁷ *Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind."*

Chapter 13 is a turning point in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is teaching larger crowds, and there's a new intensity to his mission. Jesus is already sensing that he'll be rejected and he wants to make sure people understand that the kingdom of heaven is very much a present reality.

We pick up the story on one of the busiest days of Jesus' ministry. He gets into a boat, shoves off a bit from the shore, he turns and then speaks to the large crowd gathered on the beach. He talks about how to recognize the kingdom of heaven by providing several ways of making no mistake about where, when, and how the kingdom comes into view right here, right now. Jesus talks about a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast in a large amount of flour, buried treasure that's unearthed in a field, a highly valuable pearl, and a fishing net.

The big question of course, is "why?" Why these particular stories, why these simple images? It's significant that Jesus used such unremarkable examples to illuminate such remarkable truths. Jesus was trying to keep it simple so that people could literally "get it." That's a good thing considering how complicated people love make things when it comes to spiritual matters.

With eyes wide open, we see the parable of the mustard seed as a poetic, even provocative reminder that in the kingdom of heaven, a little goes a long, long way. Every moment of growing in our relationship with Jesus, every small bit of Christ-centered grace that we extend to another person, every minute of time we give to serving a cup of water in Jesus' name, or a story we tell of how growing in discipleship brings both challenge and joy to our lives. Every time we go the extra mile to make sure that someone is respected, heard, and understood, is a small step toward the revealing of the kingdom of God. It's really not anymore complicated than that.

With eyes wide open, we see the parable of what amounts to something like a teaspoon of yeast sprinkled into almost 18 gallons of flour, as a simple yet rather subversive announcement that when God is at work in our lives, a little goes a long, long way.

When we respond to the Holy Spirit's nudge to write that card, to make that phone call or deliver those groceries, to reach out to someone who has been quarantined and missing the human connection and needs encouragement – that little kindness, that act of service may seem as insignificant as a pinch of yeast. Jesus wanted his followers to know that when God is at work in our lives, a little goes a long, long way. And let me just be clear, while it's certainly true that anyone can do nice, kind and helpful things for others, if we follow the prompting of the Spirit in our lives, when we understand who we are and what we do is responding to God's call in our lives, we are revealing the kingdom of heaven in that moment. And making it easier for someone to see the love of Jesus in their lives The kingdom of heaven is revealed in that very moment. Jesus wants his followers to live with eyes wide open. He wants us to know that a little goes a long, long way.

In mid-March when the COVID-19 pandemic began its rapid movement around the globe, we learned in a very short time how something so incredibly small and completely invisible to the naked eye can grow so rapidly and exponentially into a dramatic momentum that consumes all of our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, nations, and as a world. In much the same way, Jesus points us toward something just as global, dramatic, but with far more life-giving momentum with the intention that it would command all of our attention and resources as individuals, communities, nations, and the world: the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. This happens when people find new vision, new ways of seeing with 20/20 clarity how to be inventive, generous, inspirational, imaginative and humble.

Jesus continued to challenge people to live with their eyes wide open, to see the kingdom of heaven like a field full of treasure and a beautiful pearl worth selling everything for. Jesus was calling ordinary people into extraordinary new ways of living by sacrifice and service. The kingdom of heaven looks like people delivering meals and groceries, providing care, and checking in with those who are homebound. The kingdom of heaven unfolds and comes alive in that very moment. It's really not complicated than that.

Because the kingdom of heaven is about a momentum of love and justice, compassion and care, service and sacrifice, then even in the context of living in a global pandemic, while there may be stories of dying and death, every time someone steps into the arena of love and justice, compassion and care, service and sacrifice, the stories that are told reveal the kingdom of heaven here and now, and inspire people to do brave and courageous things in the name of Christ.

With eyes wide open, we see the parable of the net told as a challenging and engaging illustration about how in the Kingdom of God "All Are Welcome." Jesus said, "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind." Let's not miss that last line: "...catching fish of every kind." This is a beautiful, challenging and engaging invitation to throw ourselves into the water of ministry with our eyes wide open, making ourselves available to all people. It's a beautiful, challenging and engaging invitation to throw ourselves into the waters of the kingdom of heaven on earth as it is in heaven.

So, friends, what do we do with all of this, how do we make this practical? I want to challenge you to step into some clarity this week, to seek with 20/20 vision some new possibilities for living with your eyes wide open. You might be thinking that your little is just too little, that something impacting couldn't possibly come from the little that you have to offer. But we underestimate ourselves and the power of God's Spirit in us. So how do I know that a little goes a long long way? Because in the few moments that it's taken me to share these few simple stories with you, you've probably been thinking of your own examples of how the kingdom of heaven has emerged and unfolded in your life.

So friends, I have a challenge for you this week. We provide a 5 day devotional that I'd love for you to take a look at. I'd like you to spend just a little time each day working through each day's devotion. Looking at each one of these stories and imagining yourself in the story. Where are you in the story. Where do you see yourself in each of these stories? And then secondly, I'd love to have you just call a friend and talk about that with your friend. Don't just be done with the service when it's over today, really take the next step, take the next challenge and make these stories your story. And with that, you will discover again and again that you're looking at the kingdom of heaven emerging all around us, all around you. You'll see all of that with your eyes wide open.