

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 Pastor Bill Uetricht 7/30/17 8 Pentecost

I think it is fair and accurate to say that many of you who live with other people in your household often struggle with ownership rights over the television remote. The one who “owns” the remote has an enormous amount of power. That one has the power not only to determine what is watched, but to change what is watched.

And you and I live in a time when changing what is watched is a recurring reality. I note my behavior when I have the remote, which in our case, is often long enough to allow me to fall asleep. I frequently surf from channel to channel, thinking that there must be something better than what I am currently watching. When you have 400 options of what to watch there is always this sense that something better must be beyond the next click. Honestly, I am generally disappointed.

I suspect, though, that the something-better-is-going-to-come-along mentality is not the only reason we jump from channel to channel. Frankly, I think as we are watching television we discover that no one story compels us. We have 400 options—the Kardashians, the tiny house shows, “Honey Boo Boo,” “Big Brother,” “The Real Wives of New Jersey”—but believe it or not, no one story is compelling. I know. It’s hard to believe that “Honey Boo Boo” isn’t compelling, but for many it’s not. So we change the channel, seeking a story that *is* compelling. And we have a hard time finding one, even though sometimes temporarily “Honey Boo Boo” seems somewhat interesting, or at least bizarre enough to command our attention.

Jesus, the story teller, speaks today to us about the channel we land upon as we are surfing through life. He says that the “kingdom of heaven,” that is his way of talking about God and God’s activity in the world and in our lives, “is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

The kingdom, God’s activity in our lives and in the world, is so important that it’s worth everything. It’s the channel we want to

watch. It is the story that is so compelling that it demands not only our attention, but everything that we are. And here, by the way is where the metaphor of channel surfing loses its power. Stopping by some television show doesn't demand much of us. It requires us only to be spectators. One of the real challenges of modern culture—and we see it in the church as well as the society as a whole—is that we are often invited only to be spectators. As many have pointed out, we are being entertained to death. Instead of dancing, we watch people dance. Instead of singing, we listen to other people sing. Instead of playing sports, we watch other people play. We love having the remote in our hands because often it enables us not to participate.

The compelling story of our lives, Jesus is telling us, is a story that invites, in fact, requires, participation. It is a story that is seeking people who want to be “all in,” as our theme suggests. This story is so compelling that it does not allow us to simply sit by and listen to it or watch it. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; in finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Whoa! The kingdom, God's way of doing things, is what matters. It is the story that is so compelling that it demands everything that we are. It is the great pearl (the Greek word is “margarita,” by the way.) It is the drink of drinks, the food of food, the story of stories. Cody, you are being called to serve the story of stories.

Now I have to tell you, though. This God story isn't always totally apparent, fully recognizable. It's sometimes a bit hidden, more than a bit mysterious. You see, the “kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It's a small seed, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Only Jesus would compare the activity of God to a mustard seed and plant. Frankly, in Biblical days, the mustard plant was viewed negatively, thought to be a weed. There goes Jesus again. Last week, he told us that we ought not to pluck up the weeds because in so doing

we might pluck up wheat as well. Jesus seems to have a penchant for the stuff we would just like to get rid of. We all like it neat and orderly, but the compelling story he knows seems to include the ugly things, the not so moral people, the folks who could easily be forgotten or left out. For him, it doesn't have to be all orderly and neat. For him, the kingdom is a bit messy.

Jesus' story seems preoccupied with the insignificant, the small, the weak. A little seed creates a big plant. And we are not sure how. Score a point for mystery. The activity of God isn't always clearly present. It happens, but we may struggle seeing it. After all, "the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures or gallons of flour until all of it was leavened." Score another point for mystery. Who knows how that happens? A little bit of yeast all of a sudden creates a big loaf.

And score another point for small things, and frankly, for things that are not well liked by people. In Biblical days, leaven often wasn't thought to be a good thing. It sometimes was associated with bad or evil. If something was leavened, it was often thought to be polluted with evil or negativity. One bad apple was said to ruin the whole bunch.

There Jesus goes again. The story that is so compelling to him, the story he wants us to channel surf to and stay with is a story that isn't always what we expect. It is a story that embraces the weak and includes the insignificant. When you and I think of God, we think of the big and the mighty. We think of control and power. That is the story that many in our culture believe is so compelling. That is why for so many of us it is about who has the most, who runs the world with power and money. It is why so many of our politicians can't seem to work together to create a better country. Working together requires a little humility, entails a willingness to get beyond the story of power and control that we in this culture think is so darn compelling. The remotes of *our* culture cause us to surf to the stories of certainty and control, money and prestige, power and fame. Those are the channels

we get stuck on. And Jesus says the most compelling story is a story that doesn't work the way that story works. The story that is the preoccupation of his life is the story of God. And God's story surprises us. It shows up in places and among people we don't expect. It happens in ways that we never anticipate.

John Petty says that the parables about the mustard seed and the leaven are statements about how "God runs the universe." He claims, "It is through suffering, weakness, and vulnerability that God is present with us and saves us." The God we meet in Jesus' parables isn't the God of control or power. The God of Jesus' parables is mysteriously at work in the insignificant, the overlooked, the weak, the ugly, the despised, the forgotten, the small, the suffering of our lives, when we don't have it all together, when we aren't all that we are called to be, when life seems hopeless or full of despair. God is at work, we say, in the cross of Jesus. He's at work in one who didn't need to live life on the basis of control, one who didn't need to defend himself, one who suffered, one who died, one who in the world's eyes was weak and vulnerable.

You have to get this, or you might miss the story that is so compelling. If you don't get it, you might see your own weaknesses as your problem, your own vulnerabilities as your enemies, the insignificant stuff of your life as *insignificant*. If you don't get this, you might find yourself walking right on top of the people you perceive as weak, overlooking people you think are insignificant, focusing your life on achieving, making it big, winning.

That is not God's story. That is not the pearl of great price. This is not *the* compelling story of our lives. *The* compelling story is the story of love—love that suffers, love that is vulnerable, love that is willing to be weak, love that is discovered often in the small and the insignificant. That is the story of the kingdom of God.

I don't know about you, but Paul blows me away today in how he describes that love. He says that this love is so extensive that even when we don't get it, even when we don't even know what we want,

even when we don't even know how to speak the words of prayer, the Spirit (love!) prays for us. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness," he says. Our weakness is not despised. It is embraced by the Spirit of God, who in the midst of our weakness, prays to God on our behalf. This is how far love goes. It welcomes and includes us, even when we aren't feeling it, even when we aren't getting it.

This overwhelming story of love is the pearl of great price. This is the story that is compelling and demands our attention. "Honey, Boo, Boo," the Kardashians, the political posturing and shenanigans of Washington, the petty drama of your friends and relatives—they aren't worthy of your heart. Surf through those channels and get on to the story that matters, the story that God is telling.