

What a Treasure!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asks His disciples, and they say “Yes.” I wonder about that. Do they understand?

Parables both hide and reveal the Kingdom of heaven – that is, how God is at work, ruling on earth. They had to ask Jesus to explain the Parable of the Weeds. I wonder if they understand what He means by the master of the house bringing out what is new and what is old. What about you? “Have you understood all these things?”

Well, how about one more parable in which Jesus teaches us what He is doing – the Parable of the Net. This is the final parable on the Kingdom of heaven – it’s a summary parable – one to bring us to the end.

But first, I think it will be helpful if we realize that a huge shift has taken place. At the beginning of this chapter full of parables (chapter 13), Jesus is beside the sea, teaching the whole crowd “many things in parables.” However, at verse 36, Jesus and His disciples left the crowds and went into the house.

There they ask Jesus to explain the Parable of the Weeds, and like the Parable of the Net, it also ends with a fiery furnace and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is a parable of judgment – one that they need to hear – one that they need to understand.

Why? Well, let’s just say that things were beginning to heat up. John the Baptist has been arrested. The scribes and Pharisees are trying to make Jesus into a Sabbath-law breaker. They say that He casts out unclean spirits by the power of Beelzebul. They are demanding signs, proof. His own family wants to have a word with Him. And His own disciples wonder why He speaks to the people in parables

With this last parable – short and sweet as it is – Jesus cuts to the chase. He teaches them once again how God is at work – how He, God-in-the-flesh-Jesus, is ruling here on earth.

Again, God working and ruling on earth “is like” this – “like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered all kinds of things.”

You might have noticed that I didn’t say the net gathered “all kinds of fish” as you heard in the Scripture reading tonight. Ironically, in the original Greek, the word “fish” is never mentioned in this parable. It’s just assumed, since a net is thrown into the sea.

Now, this net isn’t a common net, or a throw net – the word used here is for a drag net, a seine (net). One that is weighted down and drug through the water – gathering everything in its path – “all kinds of things” the text literally says.

Fish, moss, seaweed – dead fish, leaves, old fishing equipment – dead animals, mud, snails, bugs – old sandals, pottery – all kinds of flotsam and jetsam.

The net thrown into the sea gathers “all kinds of things” – until it was full, until “it is finished.” Then the net is drug up onto the shore, and they “sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.”

Again, we assume “good” and “bad” fish, but the text doesn’t say that. And who gets to determine which are “good” and which are “bad”? One man loves to fish for a certain kind of fish, and another says it is a trash fish. Are the big ones “good” and the small ones “bad”? Is the difference between the ones that are marketable, and the unmarketable? Sickly verses healthy?

Again, the text stays away from using the word “fish” – focusing us instead on the words “good” and “bad.” The word used for “good” is the word used in Genesis 1 when God saw what He had created was “good.” Jesus is the “good” Shepherd.

It’s not the common word for “good.” This word has overtones of “beautiful, fine, fair” – or, as I like to say, “everything properly ordered.”

The word used for “bad” is also unique – meaning, “rotten, putrid, spoiled, corrupt, worthless, useless, spoiled.” You might say that it is the ugly opposite of “good.”

Do you understand? What does this parable mean? Thankfully, Jesus gives the explanation. “So it will be at the close of the age ...” That language too is interesting. It’s not just the Last Day – but more precisely – when everything reaches its goal, its end, its purpose.

The “close of the age” is when God’s work in history finally comes to His goal – His purpose for sending Jesus into this world. Then, when all is accomplished – “The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Did you notice the change in wording – going from the “good” and “bad” to the “evil” and the “righteous”?

God drags His net through the world and catches “all kinds of things” – everything! And that is consistent with the Scriptures that speak of God redeeming ALL of Creation, and not just mankind. Maybe that’s why the word “fish” is never used.

However, the redemption of mankind IS at the center of God’s work. “For God so loved the world” the Bible says – and the net catches all kinds – the “good, beautiful, fair” and the “bad, rotten, corrupt.” It doesn’t matter, Jesus died for ALL. Even as He promises in John’s Gospel – “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all [“men” or “things”] to myself.”

Jesus is lifted up on the cross – to shed His blood for the redemption of the whole Creation – including all mankind – no distinction, no difference. However, “at the close of the age” – when God’s work is brought to its completion – there will be a distinction, a sorting that takes place – a different end for the “evil” and the “righteous.”

So, who gets to make the distinction? Who determines which “sorts” – which “kinds” are thrown in the container, and which go into the fire? As Jesus has been teaching us in all the parables – it is the One who rules over the kingdom.

Jesus is the one who determines the sorting, and the distinction. And what is the distinction? He tells us – over and over again.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” Jesus says. Whosoever believes in the One the Father has sent will “not perish but have eternal life.” “Whoever hears my word and believes in Him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned.”

The Scripture says that the “righteous” are those who live by FAITH. It’s not that they are less smelly, fishy, or rotten than others – or that they are more beautiful, or fair. Nobody goes to hell because he had a rotten track record in the world – any more than anyone goes to heaven because he has a good one. The “righteous” are those who trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation.

And the “evil” – they too have been died for – redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ. They are part of “the world” that God so loved that He gave His only Son. They too are caught up in the dragnet of God’s work in the world --- but --- “he who does not believe shall be condemned.”

The one who thumbs his nose at what Jesus has done for him – the one who is adamant on making his own way – is thrown into the fiery furnace. All are judged by what Jesus did for us on the cross – but if you will not have anything to do with Jesus and His forgiveness – then your place will be one of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“Have you understood all this?” God work is like “a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Ever since the beginning (the old) – God has been at work for you and for your salvation – and not only you, but for the WHOLE WORLD. That is the treasure of His grace.

What is new is that Jesus is God-in-the-flesh – that He is on earth to rule over sin and death. And so, Jesus dies for all. Sheds His blood for the redemption of the whole world. And with His death, draws ALL to Himself.

In Jesus, “it is finished” – your salvation, your end, your eternal life. That is the treasure He reveals to faith by His parables. God grant you faith to receive what He reveals and gives to you.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.