

St. Andrew's UMC
July 27th, 2008
Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52
" Kingdom Of Heaven May Be Compared To..."

Last week, an outdoors columnist, Tom Stienstra, wrote an article about backpacking in SF Chronicle. He provided a chart detailing side by side, the pros and cons of backpacking. To share a few:

"You won't be bugged by anybody" on pros side is countered by: "Damn, I miss my wife," on cons. "Body conditioned perfectly" is balanced with "Is death near?" "Become one with nature," with "Now you're a dirtball." "The wildlife is fantastic," with "The animals all want your food." "Not eating any junk," with "Pay anything for a cheeseburger." "Pack getting lighter as you go," with "That means food is running out." "Views are astounding," with "Climbs have lungs heaving." "For every up, there is down," with "Descents punish your knees." "Nothing like the camp life," with "Damn those mosquitoes." "Meals calculated each day," with "God, I'm starving." "Nothing like sleep out of doors," with "Awoke six times the first night." "Best-tasting water in the world," with "Five miles to next stream." "Spectacular cumulus cloud," with "Trembling at chance of lightning." "Wildflowers everywhere," with "Step on beehive, you get swarmed."

The pros are incentives enough to draw a crowd to backpacking, while the cons are horrors enough to keep the rest away for good. It appears that all the elements of pros and cons are inherently and mutually exclusive values. Since there is nothing American ingenuity cannot fix, this is how we fix backpacking: the guy takes his wife along.

Since the wife would not budge, unless the said conditions have improved, the guy takes along the hot shower, a refrigerator, the flush toilet, a bedroom, an iPod, a laptop, a TV, the satellite Dish, and a sofa. There. A Recreational Vehicle fixes any cons on backpacking. Unfortunately, there are wives (like mine) who think an RV is still not good enough. That kind of problem can only be fixed by a hotel with 3-star and above ratings.

All that fixing creates still another, fundamental problem: Once we decide to take these things, it is not backpacking any more.

But is it true: are pros and cons *necessarily* mutually exclusive? Aren't the pros and the cons the two sides of the same coin, so that without one the whole cannot exist? Can the bird fly, if the right wing did not like the left wing, so it had the left one clipped? How does the kingdom of Heaven fix the cons of backpacking? How does the kingdom of Heaven fix the problems which the right wing and the left wing have?

Jesus provided unique perspectives on what he called the kingdom of Heaven by using everyday things. Jesus was the first one who preached the kingdom of Heaven (or, the kingdom of God in other Gospels). No one else before him ever spoke about such.

Unfortunately for us unenlightened, the nature of kingdom of Heaven was of other-worldly, or of the ineffable quality, that Jesus had difficult time describing exactly what it was. So Jesus resorted to comparing it to concrete things that anyone would understand. Jesus spoke in the parables, therefore, in order to teach his listeners.

There are certain spiritual characteristics of the kingdom of Heaven that may be compared to the material things found in the secular world: "The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed..." "The kingdom of Heaven is like yeast..." "The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in the field..." "The kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls..." "Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea..."

Every one knows what a mustard seed looks like. Everyone knows what yeast is, the treasure, the fine pearls, and the fishing net. Yet from this commonly known objects, Jesus tried to draw out the pictures of the kingdom of Heaven, so that the ordinary and uneducated people could understand what the privileged and learned could not. We live in the modern, technologically advanced, scientific world. Do we understand the kingdom of Heaven ?

The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed whose beginning is insignificant, but it grows so big, that it benefits many. The kingdom of Heaven is like yeast whose portion is miniscule, but its presence permeates the entire loaf in due time. The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in the field, which some one would commit all his resources to acquire it. Similarly, the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant who is in search of the

fine pearls, who, upon discovery of a pearl of great value, sells all the pearls he has to secure it. The kingdom of Heaven is like a net that caught fish of every kind, but the fishermen kept only the useful ones, and threw out the bad ones.

The kingdom of Heaven is almost insignificant, but its consequence is huge. The kingdom of Heaven is almost invisible, but its effect transforms the entire loaf. The kingdom of Heaven is so valuable, that it is worth selling one's total possessions to acquire it. The kingdom of Heaven is like a person who would commit all his resources to secure it. The kingdom of Heaven invites everyone, but only the good may enter it. And the scribe who is trained in this kingdom is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.

That scribe is Jesus' answer to the problems of the pros and cons of backpacking. That is Jesus' answer to fix the problems of the old versus the new, the conservative versus the progressive, and the right wing versus the left wing. Jesus was confident that the training in the ways of the kingdom of God could raise a scribe (who is an expert in the scriptures) who can indeed bring out the treasure from both the old and the new.

This is one scribe who could interpret the scriptures in the way of the kingdom, in order to bring out the treasures of the old and the new. This is one scribe who can bring out the treasures of the scriptures, and apply it in the way that is relevant to both the old and the new. This is one scribe who is not dictated by the partisan politics, but sees all that is good in both the old and the new, and puts it to use.

So, a backpacker who is trained in the kingdom of God would recognize the fact that eliminating the cons and replacing it with an RV or staying in a hotel would totally destroy the very essence of backpacking. The backpacker who is trained in the way of the kingdom would bring out from both the pros and the cons what would enhance the entire experience of backpacking.

In the similar way, denouncing anything just because it is of the old perspective would also cut off the root from what is new, and deny the longevity of the whole.

There are at least three, old-fashioned values that any community of faith could cherish: 1) the practice of piety—as opposed to the free-for-all life

style; 2) the spiritual discipline—as opposed to dissipation in entertainment and comfort; and 3) the dedication to the church community as the body of Christ—as opposed to the merely hanging one’s name in the membership of a church organization.

I observe this tendency, on one hand, that the conservative communities uphold well for some reason: the practice of piety, the spiritual discipline, and the commitment to the body of Christ. In the progressive community, on the other hand, I notice well-practiced promotion of socio-economic justice, relief work, and open-minded acceptance of diversity.

The faith community that is trained in the kingdom of God brings out the old and the new: old-fashioned spirituality tempered with the progressive interpretation and application of the scriptures that are relevant to the modern, scientific context. The good is brought out of both old and new.

For the faith community such as ours, it would be good for our spiritual health to temper the progressive values with the conservative values mentioned above. Not everything in the progressive values is productive, just as not everything in the conservative values is useful.

What the liberal perspective tends to lack is the piety, the spiritual discipline, and the commitment to the Body of Christ. If these can be incorporated into the progressive ideas and practices, it would create a formidable faith community that is founded on the scriptural principles, and guided by the power of the Spirit.

As for the practical direction, we can begin with drawing a line in our mundane activities, in order to set apart what is godly from what is secular. We could begin to devote the first 30 minutes of the day to reading of the scriptures, prayer, and journaling. And we could commit ourselves to the Body of Christ, called St. Andrew’s UMC. If we could make this our communal habit, we would train ourselves in the kingdom of heaven. And one day, the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a little church located in Palo Alto .