

Provoked by the Parables

The Net

January 23, 2011

**Psalm 27 & Matthew 13:47-48
(Hymns – 15, 248, 371, 774)**

In this short parable, we encounter some familiar themes.
It seems to be yet another simile –
the Kingdom of God is like this –
to help people make sense of something about the kingdom
that confuses them.

In the parable of the Growing Seed,
the focus was on time it was taking for the kingdom to come.
When will the kingdom come in its fullness?
Jesus' answer was this.
Relax, be vigilant, be faithful.
The kingdom will come fully in God's good time.
Meanwhile, be part of the growth of the kingdom yourself.
Live lives of blessing.

In the parable of the Wheat and Weeds,
the focus was on the fact that good and bad
seemed to continue to co-exist in the kingdom.
People still did bad things.
When was this going to be sorted out and who would do the sorting?
Jesus answer is this.
The sorting out will happen at the end
and the sorting will be done by God and his agents.
It is not for human beings to worry about being judges.
They are to focus on being faithful to God's purposes here and now,
to be the kind of people that please God by keeping the covenant –
loving God, loving others, and loving themselves.

The same theme emerges yet again
in the parable of the Net.
This is parable about the judgement,
and especially about when it will happen.

Think again for the dominant image in the parable.
It's a fish net.

It's a net strung between two fishermen or two boats
that is dragged through the water,
gathering up everything in its path.

Apparently there were some 27 species of fish
in the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' time.
Strict Jewish dietary laws dictated
that only fish with scales and gills could be eaten.
All other fish were unclean,
so had to be thrown away.
(Lev 11:9)

The history of and debates over Jewish dietary laws are complex
and I make no claim to understand their intricacies.
There are three sources in the Old Testament –
Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.
The core purpose of these laws,
according to Deuteronomy and Leviticus,
was to distinguish Israel from the other nations.
Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
God has separated out Israel for this purpose.
They were his people and he was their God.
They should not defile themselves with unholy things.
They should remain pure and holy by following the laws strictly.

This is the kind of background
that Jesus' Jewish listeners would have understood
when they heard this simile –
the kingdom of God is like a net.
Because of the strict clarity of this law,
some thought they could do the sorting,
decide who was good and bad,
determine who was in the kingdom and who was out,
who was included and who was excluded.
It was simple – keep the law and you're in,
break the law and you're out.

In Jesus' time, this view was represented most strongly by the Pharisees.
The name denotes "one who separates himself,"
or keeps away from persons or things impure,
in order to attain the degree of holiness and righteousness
required in those who would commune with God.
The Pharisees formed a league or brotherhood of their own,
admitting only those who pledged themselves
to the strict observance of Levitical purity.

Of this party within his religious tradition –
and remember, Jesus remained a Jew all his life –
Jesus was consistently critical.
Many of his debates were with this party.
Many of his parables are told to present a different view of the kingdom.
There are some who think Jesus himself was a Pharisee,
or heavily influenced by this tradition.
What he was doing in his teachings
was calling this tradition back to its roots in love rather than law.
It was God's love that informed and shaped the laws that should be the focus.

Two features of that different view of the kingdom are important
in understanding the parable of the net.

One, God's love encompasses both the good fish and bad,
both the clean and the unclean
as defined by a strict interpretation of the Law.
Christians are called to be with all kinds of people
as a blessing and an influence for good.
The judgement will take place,
but not by them and not now.
And the judgement will be done by a loving, gracious, merciful God.

Two, the focus of attention for the faithful
is not on ritual cleanliness or ethnicity,
but upon the quality of grace we display in our lives.
What we do in this life matters.
How we live with others really matters to God.
We will be held accountable,
but the focus of that accountability
will be on loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves.
It will not be on the purity of our observance of ritual laws
that separate and distinguish us from others.

There is both promise and warning in this parable.
The promise is that judgement is in the hands of a loving God.
The warning is that what we do matters,
not in ways that are meant to scare us
but rather in ways that are meant to encourage us
in our faithfulness.