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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Going shopping is a favorite pastime in this country. You can tell it's popular by all the cars that fill the parking lots of our shopping malls and our big box stores. A full parking lot is a sign of a thriving economy and that's a good thing. Not finding a parking space is not such a good thing. Neither is having to stand in line or having to hunt around for someone to wait on you. So since shopping is not my own favorite pastime, my practice is to go shopping at dinner time when a lot of the crowd has gone home for dinner. It's so much easier to get someone to find a place to park. And at that time of day it's easier to find someone to actually wait on you. Finding what you're looking for is easier when the crowd is not there. I like being able to take my time and really look at all my options.

Reading through this Gospel from Matthew kind of reminds me of shopping. Matthew has given us an assortment of parables to consider. It is tempting to rush in, grab one, and take it home to try it on. But as with my preferred method of shopping that I just described, I'd rather take a look at each one and carefully consider the message that each one has for us today.

Before we do that, bear with me as I suggest another way the act of clothes shopping helps us to get at this reading. When we shop for something to wear, we inevitably need to try on whatever we find. When I try on clothes in the stores, I find that the mirrors and the lighting tend to show way too many of my flaws, or too much of what I'd rather not see. Not only that, but so often the stores have full view mirrors; those three panel mirrors that reveal every side, every angle for inspection. Maybe we

tend to read scripture that way. We look for what we want to see and try not to see the parts of scripture that challenge us.

In this Gospel reading, Matthew put together five parables. Each one reveals a different aspect of the Kingdom of God and if we allow it, each one is there to challenge us. Matthew knew and we know too that Jesus taught in parables because He knew that describing God's Kingdom using familiar images would allow people who to grasp their meanings more easily. He used well known, easily identifiable, small images to point to a large concept about God. The stories Jesus told were grounded in the world in which first century people lived. The images worked well for them. But the images that were easily understood in the first century need to be re-interpreted today. Like in my example of shopping, when the crowd is thinner it is nice to have someone to wait on you and point out the things you need to see. Allow me to be your personal shopping consultant this morning.

Let's take a look at the first two parables in this collection. The images used in them are a mustard seed and yeast. In our world, we might presume that mustard seeds give us the plant that gives us the delicious condiment that we like to put on hot dogs; or maybe we know how very tiny the mustard seed actually is and that it grows into a plant of significant size. And we know that yeast gives us delicious bread. But that is not at all what the mustard seed and yeast meant in first century Palestine. In their world, the mustard plant was a voracious, annoying weed. And yeast initiated a fermenting process that Jews avoided, so when the nameless woman in the parable mixed it with three measures of flour she was effectively tainting the food for the whole village.

Matthew included these two parables to highlight a facet of God's nature that people don't often consider. That facet is God's persistent intervening in our world in spite of ourselves. We cannot predict when or where God will show up, we just know from experience, ours and theirs, that God will. We human beings like to think we see God's pattern, that we understand it God's ways and will; we like to think we know who God likes and who God doesn't like; that we know what should be let in and what to keep out. But God in God's time shows up, most often when we don't expect it, and shows us that we don't know as much as we thought we did. God interrupted history with the birth of Jesus who showed us that it is God's will is to bring forth his kingdom in our world. God's kingdom is coming and there is nothing we can do to stop it. The parable tells us the mustard seed will grow in spite of our trying to eradicate it and it will become a shady tree where birds can make nests. The leavened bread produces more food than simple flour could and in the end the flour feeds thousands. Imagine what would happen if humanity cooperated with God's will instead of getting in the way of it. Do we get in the way of it when we perceive weeds where God perceives wide spaces to nest?

Now that Matthew has revealed one facet of God's Kingdom, the next two parables go on to reveal another. These are the parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl. It is obvious this is about discovering things that are of value. But look a little deeper at the parable and we find that the finder's response is where we find the surprise. The man who found the hidden treasure was so grateful, so enormously appreciative that he sold everything he had and bought the whole field. The finder of the pearl of great value sold everything in order to acquire just that pearl.

From the first two parables we know of God's unceasing, relentless activity in our world to call us back toward him.

In these two parables, Matthew guides us to our proper response to God's extravagant love for us. It is to offer extravagant love and trust and faith right back to God. Must we sell everything we own in order to do that? I don't think that is the right response. The point is that the discovery of the precious reality of the kingdom of God is worth more than all the material stuff we could ever hope to have. How can we possibly respond in kind considering the enormity of our gratitude?

We need to remember that we are not God, we belong to God. Though we would like to give back to God as extravagantly as God gives to us, we cannot. We are human and we have limits. But we can draw near to God, as near as we can, considering that God makes every effort to draw near to us.

The last parable is there to remind us that we have a choice in this life. In this parable, fishers reel in a net full of fish that contain good fish mixed in with the bad. The good fish represent the way God imagines our world for us. The bad fish represent the world gone awry. In the parable the fishermen separate the good fish from the bad. But separating fish is a whole lot easier than the challenge we face every day. You can smell a bad fish. But a lot of times in our world the bad choice, a choice that leads us away from God, can smell and look good. It is so easy for us to slip up and make the wrong choice. We might decide to sleep in instead of helping out at a soup kitchen, we might decide to go to the river instead of to church, we might decide that our relationship with God can wait our social lives cannot.

What can help us be better Christians? What can help us make better choices? In the very last part of this Gospel reading, we learn that the scribes of the Kingdom of God will reveal God presence with us from the old and the new. In our modern day world, the scribes of the Kingdom are the preachers and teachers in the church, the writers and speakers who reveal God's presence with us and dreams for us. It's like this. When we shop it helps to have someone help us who knows more about the merchandise than we do. When we seek to know God's will for each of us and for our world, the consultant we need is Jesus. He's the one who knows more about God and God's kingdom than we do and he can help us find it.