

At the end of the choir season we gave a concert that included many of our special favorites from the year and a couple of pieces that were first time performances. One of the first time performances was the spiritual *If I Got My Ticket, Lord*. Joe Williams gave such a moving performance of the solo part that I told him this would be my next sermon.

The words to the song go like this:

*If I got my ticket, Lord, can I ride, can I ride, can I ride, ride away to Heaven in the mornin'? That gospel train is a-comin' for me, and the Promised Land I'll gain. Oh, I hear them wheels a-hummin', my Lord, I'm ready to board that train. Let me ride. If I got my ticket, Lord, can I ride?*

The song immediately made me think of my grandfathers because both were railroad men. They worked for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, now the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad. Papa Daughtridge worked in the freight depot keeping the books. Granddaddy Coggins worked in the machine shop across the tracks from the depot welding wheels and chassis frames. When they retired they were given "golden tickets" which would allow them to ride anywhere in North America on the railroads. They boarded a train in Rocky Mount, NC and made their way to New York City, on to Toronto, and then crossing western Canada to Vancouver. Traveling by ferry and by car they made the final leg of the trip to Anchorage, Alaska where my dad was stationed. What a glorious visit we had which included a few days together fishing for salmon on the Kenai Peninsula. Sounds like a trip to heaven to me so I'm asking, Lord, can I ride?

There is something romantic and nostalgic about trains. The rapid growth of trains in this country in the 1850s gave inspiration to many songs of all genres about trains. The train became a metaphor for escape, for longing, or for a journey to a destination of fulfillment. Search for "songs about trains" and you

will find hundreds of them. Many of them are spirituals like *If I Got My Ticket, Lord*. In this song and others like it “gospel train” was understood to be code for the Underground Railroad. *The Gospel Train’s A’Comin* could be sung as celebration to give notice to other slaves that an escape was being planned to seek freedom. “The fare is cheap and all can go, the rich and poor are there. No second class aboard this train, no difference in the fare. Get on board little children, there’s room for many more”.

A regular inclusion on the singing tour of the Stillman College Choir led by Dr James Arthur Williams was the spiritual *Same Train*. “Same train carried my father. Same train carried my mother. Same train be back tomorrow. Same train carried my brother. Same train carried my sister. Same train carried poor sinner. Same train be back tomorrow.”

Dr Williams says that *Same Train* “talks about the fact that as black people we’re talking about getting to the other side. We talk about going in a boat or going on a train. The train is going to come and take you to a better land. Whether that better land was in this world or the next, it was worth singing about.”

To a person enslaved, heaven was somewhere just north of the Ohio River. That is where they could find freedom. The Freedom Center in Cincinnati, the John Rankin House and John Parker House in Ripley all document the fight of abolitionists and those who risked their lives to find freedom from bondage. John Parker was a freedman who managed to buy his own freedom from his master by the time he was 18. His autobiography titled *His Promised Land* tells about transitioning from being a slave to building a life and a business in Ripley. He became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and helped more than 400 others find their way to the Promised Land, heaven on their minds. Especially in the midst of harsh times or death, we also spend time imagining heaven.

Some of you remember the scene in *Field of Dreams*, one of the best baseball movies ever made, where the ghost father John Kinsella asks his son Ray, “Is this heaven?” Ray replies pragmatically, “No, it’s Iowa”. (Perhaps Matthew or Pastor Kent would have said an emphatic Yes) John responds, “It’s so beautiful I thought it was heaven.” This prompts Ray to ask his father, “Is there a heaven?” John replies with assurance, “Oh yeah, it’s where dreams come true.”

How would you describe heaven? Is it a place or a state of being? What does the Promised Land look like to you? Is it where dreams come true or where God’s promises are fulfilled? Or perhaps, it is both.

Chapter 13 in the Gospel of Matthew is an accumulation of mini parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. Our text today contains four images of the Kingdom. When you read through this chapter, read it as if the question posed to Jesus is “What is the Kingdom of Heaven like?”.

In the first set of parables we have a man who plants a mustard seed in his field and it grows into “the greatest of shrubs” and becomes a tree. I happen to have a mustard seed with me. Can you see it from your pew? If you answer yes, then you have really good eyesight. This is an object lesson for adults.

The mustard seed was an image Jesus painted in his story to illustrate that great things can come out of small beginnings. The disciples needed encouragement. They were wondering what twelve men could possibly do in the face of legions of opposition. The Roman Empire and the High Priests were in cahoots to quell this cultic uprising. When the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cure a boy with epilepsy he said to them “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; nothing will be impossible for you.” (Mt 17:20) With just a little bit of faith they could have a great impact. The seed planted with the disciples grew into a throng of believers covering the earth.

In the next parable Jesus talks about yeast. A woman mixes yeast with flour until it is all leavened. If you have ever done any baking, or tasting, you know that if there is not the right amount of yeast, you cannot make good bread. Instead, you will be eating flat bread or crackers. I thank God Peggy makes bread, good bread! She took a loaf out of the oven on Thursday, buttered a slice and handed it to me still warm. Yum, yum! Now why would I want a cracker? Give me leaven for heaven, keep me baking for the Lord! Ray, you can use that in our next VBS sing along. Again we see that a small amount of faith can be contagious and spread throughout its surrounds. Faith mixing with life makes life larger and more promising.

The Faithful Ten of First Baptist history recognized on a plaque in the narthex said, "We WILL be a church." They were the yeast that grew into an historic church whose impact has been felt far beyond the city limits of Dayton. Next year we celebrate 200 years as a church and it is because of mustard seeds and leaven. When we think small, God helps us think big. Our faith can be bigger than we can comprehend because God rules the Kingdom of Heaven, not us.

The second set of parables starts with a story about a treasure that someone finds in a field and then hides it until he can go, sell everything he has, and then he buys the field. The other parable in this grouping says the Kingdom is "like a merchant in search of fine pearls." When he finds one he sells all that he has in order to buy it. "

Both the great treasure and the pearl illustrate that the Kingdom is of such value that it is a joy to give up everything for it. Verse 44 says, "in his JOY, he goes and sells all that he has." Can you imagine selling everything you own to have one thing of great value? Those who were enslaved saw an opportunity for escape as a chance to book a ticket for heaven, and they were willing to leave everything else behind. Is there anything you possess that is worth more than the

Kingdom of Heaven? As C. S. Lewis said, "There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind."

While Matthew uses the term Kingdom of Heaven, Mark and Luke use the synonymous term Kingdom of God. John speaks of the Kingdom as eternal life. All present the picture of the Kingdom as an eternal reality which is ruled by the sovereignty of God. Weekly we pray following the teaching of Christ, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The Kingdom is here now and it is manifested in us when we accept the rule of God in our lives. And the Kingdom is part of our future as we leave our mortal bodies to continue life in the eternal realm, described as being in heaven, the dwelling place of God. In the final consummation of the Kingdom good wins and evil is purged by the goodness of God.

Lastly, how do we get to the Kingdom of Heaven? Is my baptismal certificate a ticket to ride the gospel train? Pastor Jason told me a story about a man who asked to be baptized and he wanted to know if he would get a gold ticket after the baptism.

Hear this from Romans 10:13: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" The Apostle Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" when he was overcome with doubt and fear in the midst of a stormy sea. Jesus reached out his hand and saved him. He will reach out his hand and save you when you call on him.

As I grow older I sometimes wonder when the train is coming for me. At other times I feel like I am already in heaven, like when I am standing in the middle of the river enjoying all of God's creation. Peggy worries about me being on the river alone so I text "off the river" when I get back to my car to let her know that I am okay. Actually, it would suit me fine to die on the river, or any place where I feel surrounded by the presence of God.

Returning from a recent vacation in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina we were detoured off of the Blue Ridge Parkway. We passed through small towns on the ridges of the mountains that I didn't even know existed even though I was born in NC. As we came around a curve on highway 221, just outside of Jefferson, a red brick church with decorations across the front caught my attention. I abruptly, that means without signaling or warning my co-pilot, pulled into the parking lot and saw that the entire front of the church had been decorated for Vacation Bible School. I mean, they were "all in" for VBS! The church had a brick marquee similar to the one we have out front and the name of the church was Welcome Home Baptist Church.

When I go to heaven I hope there is a Welcome Home Baptist Church just inside the gate. What a great homecoming that would be! It would suit me just fine as long as there is good preaching from the Apostles and good singing from a choir of angels. A little creek out back to throw a line in once in a while wouldn't hurt either.

As the spiritual (*Seat in the Kingdom*) declares, "As long as I got a seat in the Kingdom, it's all right." Yes sir, it's all right!

All aboard and Amen!