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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, January 10, 2024  
Matthew 13:44-58  
Their Unbelief

HOLY GOSPEL .....Matthew 13:44-58, RSV

*Last week Jesus told a series of parables, including the Parable of the Tares and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Now, he continues with parables, and we read of his rejection by his hometown.*

<sup>44</sup>“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup>“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, <sup>46</sup>who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup>“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

<sup>51</sup>“Have you understood all this?” They said to him, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup>And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

<sup>53</sup>And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, <sup>54</sup>and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? <sup>55</sup>Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup>And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” <sup>57</sup>And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house.” <sup>58</sup>And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

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

I am struck by this last line in this evening’s reading. I read and read the parables in this evening’s reading, and I am grateful for them, but rather take them in stride. But when I reach the last verse, I become concerned and

worried and hope that nothing like this should happen among us! That last line goes this way:

<sup>58</sup>And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (Matthew 13:58, RSV)

Jesus had done mighty works in the past. He had healed the man with the withered hand. He had healed the man who was deaf and dumb. He had preached beautiful parables — earthly stories with heavenly meanings. But in his hometown, Nazareth, he does few mighty works there “because of their unbelief.” Our text does not say that he *could not* do mighty works there, but rather that he *does not* do mighty works there. The unbelief of his hometown folk does not limit his ability, but rather he limits himself, as if it would be a waste of time to do mighty works before a group of people who simply do not believe in him.

They dismiss him. They say he is the carpenter’s son. They point out that they know his kin — his mother, Mary, and his brothers and sisters. It is as if they have sized him up. They are unwilling to believe that Jesus can be greater than the box they put him in. They cannot imagine that Jesus is greater than what they assign him to be. The evidence of their own eyes and ears is not good enough for them. They acknowledge that he is a powerful preacher and doer of mighty deeds — “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” But they will not permit themselves to be moved by him. They remain unimpressed by Jesus. And Jesus is hurt by them. He recognizes that they do not honor him. And so we have that troubling final line:

<sup>58</sup>And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (Matthew 13:58, RSV)

This line is striking for me because it points the finger right at you and me. It does not permit us to imagine that Jesus will do whatever he does paying us no mind, as if our attitude to him does not matter to him. The attitude of his hometown neighbors did matter to him. It mattered so much that he did no mighty deeds there.

And I have one particular mighty deed in mind for us: I am thinking of a transformed life. What can be a mightier deed for us than that? That we should be changed — changed in a holy direction?

Look! There stands Jesus on the seashore. He is bidding us to follow him this day. If we do, we will make ourselves useful to God and to our neighbors. However chaotic or wicked our past might have been, today Jesus is calling us to walk with him, and in the walking, we will do better.

But what about unbelief? Their unbelief robbed the people of Nazareth of many mighty works. At the least, their unbelief deprived them of the chance to become the friends and disciples of Jesus — which would have been a mighty deed indeed! The fishermen might have believed in Jesus and walked with him, but the unbelieving folks of Nazareth did not, by and large. Their unbelief left them as they were. They might have been content with that, but it was so much more less than it could have been. Their unbelief hindered their ability to be all their Maker had intended for them.

So, about us: We might be inclined to think that either we believe or we do not and that is that. Nothing to be done about it. But that is not quite true, is it? We can nurture our faith in Jesus. Jesus is in fact on our seashore bidding us to walk with him today. If we do not believe in him, then I guess we will not walk with him. And yet such unbelief is not innocent. There is no getting around the personal fact that you and I have heard about Jesus. People have commended him to us. Perhaps mother and father did. If not, then still, two thousand years of the saints have witnessed to us that Jesus is good and worthy of being followed. If we remain unmoved before what we know of Jesus and what the saints have witnessed to, I cannot believe that such indifference is innocent. Rather, it reflects a carelessness about our souls. We can do better. If we cannot absolutely swear that we believe in Jesus... if we stand amidst his neighbors in Nazareth and doubt him... nonetheless, we can up and follow Jesus anyway. And in the following, by God's grace, our unbelief will fade away.

Our challenge then is not as simple as belief or unbelief. There is a way of life that is compatible with belief in Jesus, and that is the way of life we should follow. We should up and follow that One on the seashore, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.