

7th Sunday after Pentecost, RCL, Year A

July 30, 2017

1 Kings 3:5-12

Psalm 119:129-136

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

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Our Pervasive & Persistent Kingdom of God

Have you ever experienced someone explaining something a bit obscure but you really have no idea what they are talking about? And, because you don't want to look foolish or hurt their feelings you simply nod your head, yes. Some things simply must be experienced, internalized, before we can grasp its meaning. I think the disciples must have felt something like this in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew.

The disciples are gathered all around Jesus and school is in session. Jesus shares a litany of parables to help them imagine what it means for the Kingdom of Heaven to be here on earth. At the conclusion he asks them whether they understand and they all respond with a resounding yes! I seriously doubt they would have passed a pop quiz on the subject. And, understandably so. Like all good parables, they throw us a curve ball, leaving us with more questions than answers.

To help us better understand I think it is helpful to focus on the first two parables; the one about the mustard seed and the parable about the yeast, also known as leaven. Both are very common items that most people, two thousand years ago or even today, would not associate with something so grand, so mystical or holy as God's realm.

The mustard seed is tiny and weighs almost nothing. Some of you may remember the fad in the 60's – a necklace with a mustard seed cast in a tiny glass ball that hung on the chain. This miniscule seed produces a massive bush that can span 15 feet and strong enough that birds seek it for roosting and shelter from the hot Middle Eastern sun. It is so prolific and so hard to control, it is considered more of a weed and a nuisance. The mustard plant sprouts haphazardly and grows where and when it will – all from this tiny, tiny seed.

Yeast is also a very small but an essential element used for baking leavened bread. If you are a baker you know that once the dried particles of yeast are activated with the right amount of moisture and heat the dough magically comes alive and rises on its own accord. You have no control over it.

In addition to the common nature and the diminutive quality of these two elements, there is also the fact that in Jesus' time both the mustard seed and yeast were viewed in a very negative

light.¹ The mustard bush was an invasive pest that no one in their right mind would intentionally plant in their garden. It is much like a weed we have in the southeast. If you have ever driven in the southeast you no doubt have seen kudzu; that ubiquitous leafy green vine that grows about everywhere and clings to everything, much like the mustard plant. *It is nearly impossible to eradicate ever since it was brought over from China to help with soil erosion in the early part of the 20th century.*² In the Bible yeast is seen as something that contaminates. It is pernicious, evil or sinful in nature. Which makes it all the more confusing, and even ironical as to why Jesus would use these common elements to compare to the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is in the personhood of Jesus where divinity and humanity meet here on earth.³ What better person is there than Jesus to assure us that God's realm can be found in the most common, ordinary parts of our lives, just as he is.⁴ In fact, there is no place that God is not. God cannot be contained nor shut out. Wherever we are, no matter how far we may feel from God at the moment, God is present – wherever that may be. All of creation, including ourselves, comes from God and embodies the sacred. After all we are made in God's image. Jesus affirms this. In him we see the abundance of God's grace infused in every aspect of Jesus' life. Every time Jesus reached out in love to heal a leper; when he showed compassion for the poor widow the world had forgotten; and, when he forgave those who nailed him to the cross, the realm of God was near. And, we are called to follow Jesus and to live as he lived. This is a life filled with God's abundant grace and a life that is transformed by love and forgiveness. This is the Kingdom of God here on earth and it is for this that we were created.

When I was a hospital chaplain I often was paged in the small hours of the night to offer pastoral care to a patient, their family or a staff member. More often than not I had no idea what I would find when I entered the hospital room. I just knew it was not good news. But, I also knew that I did enter that room alone. I knew the Risen Christ was with me, holding it all, the pain, the sorrow and the fear. But, that is not all. I also was witness to incredible acts of love and compassion in the midst of heartbreak and tragedy and I knew that the realm of God was near, nearer than my own breath.

Years ago a friend of mine shared that her idea of heaven was sitting under an old oak tree on her grandmother's farm eating her grandmother's fried chicken. For her this was an image of unconditional love and security she treasured. What would the Kingdom of Heaven be for you today? What does your image of heaven reveal about you and your need of God?

If we dare to take these parables and ponder them in our hearts we may be surprised by the ways God is active in our lives. God's grace breaks into our lives and takes us by surprise, often at the most mundane times. When this happens, somewhere along the line the seed of God's love grows and flourishes and we realize that we no longer live only for ourselves but we live and belong

¹David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/07/pentecost-7a-parables-that-do-things/last> accessed on July 28, 2017.

²David Brehm, <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/08/something-unexpected-mt.html>, last accessed on July 29, 2017.

³Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 286, 288.

⁴Arnold, 286,288.

to something bigger. We belong to God and God's dream for the world. I think this is the truth Jesus was sharing – God's realm of love is much bigger and more pervasive than we could ever hope or imagine. But, do we have the eyes to see it; do we have the heart to feel it or the ears to hear it?

Henri Nouwen, priest and scholar, shared what it means to discover the Kingdom of Heaven:

“Every moment of our life we have an opportunity to choose joy. It is in the choice that our true freedom lies, and that freedom is, in the final analysis, the freedom to love.”⁵ This love is the Kingdom of Heaven that has come near.

Amen.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, quote from myincrediblewebsite.com, last accessed on July 28, 2017.