

Sermon preached by the Reverend Margie Baker at St. John's Episcopal Church, West
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Proper 12, Year A

Five parables. Five parables! Each parable is a sermon in and of itself. Books have been written about each one.

Not only do we have five parables this week, but one of them is not like the others. The first four seem to be about discovery and value. The mustard seed is tiny but grows into a tree that shelters the birds. Yeast is what makes the bread rise. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure so wonderful that someone goes and sells everything he owns just to buy the field where the treasure lies. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl so fine that a man sells everything he owns just to buy it. The fifth parable? It's about something else entirely, about selection, separation. Keep the good fish, throw out the bad. We heard a similar parable last week, about wheat and weeds. It seems to be a parable of judgment, out of place with what comes before. My inclination is to ignore the fifth parable, but as with anything in the Bible, the parts you want to run from are the parts you need to explore.

It is something Saint Paul says in this week's passage from Romans that helps me comprehend and join together these seemingly disparate parables.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's my mustard seed. That's what I clutch and care for, that is my treasure. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing can separate us from God. There is nothing on earth that does not bear God's imprint, including you and me. God himself is present too; the maker of the heavens and the earth is at once transcendent and immanent- big and great and wondrous, and very, very close. God is always present.

In Jesus we have the clearest proof of God's presence among us, the gift of God being always near. In Jesus Christ, in his incarnation, his life and ministry, God is with us in a visceral, literal, powerful way. In his death, and especially in his glorious resurrection, God demonstrates the limitlessness of God's presence in our lives. God Incarnate dies nailed to a tree, is laid in the tomb, and even that cannot separate us from God.

When everything else in the world goes wrong, I know God is there. When I tried being an agnostic in college, the annoying problem was that *God was there*. God is *always* present, and nothing can separate us from God. Whether we seek God or not, God is there, loving us and calling us and inviting us into relationship. My parents have a little plaque that says, *Bidden or not bidden, God is present*. It's not up to us to conjure God or find God in a particular place. God is ever present. I hold on to that like a lifeline. Just knowing that God is there- that God is *here*- changes the way I live my life. The Kingdom of God has come near, and I want to participate.

I place the highest value on God, and I feel joy at the delightful gift of God's presence in my life, as perfect and unexpected as treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price. And because I place the highest value on God, I try to live in response to that presence in my life. Everything I do either brings me closer to God or separates me from God. This is how I understand the final parable in today's gospel, not as separating good people from bad people, but as culling the best in each of us from the mess that needs to be thrown out. The Kingdom of God is like a net thrown into the sea that caught fish of every kind. The Kingdom has come near, and because I have experienced it, because I yearn to live in that kingdom, I see my actions more clearly. Some of my actions are bad fish, y'all, and what a gift to be able to notice and change. I yearn to live in the nearer presence of God, and so I look at everything I do through the lens of love of God and love of neighbor, and at my best I do not shy away from the places I've fallen short. Living a Christian life isn't about never sinning, never missing the mark, but about having the courage to know yourself and having faith in God's unending mercy and forgiveness. To rejoice in God's presence is to rejoice in God's grace and mercy. It's to know that the God who made us has a dream for us, and we can only live into that dream if we stay in close relationship to the source of all.

The Good News of these parables is that our job is to *notice* God in the world, in our lives, and then respond. Presence precedes action. God's presence precedes our action. We cannot do it

all ourselves, and we aren't supposed to. We do best when we dwell in God's presence, when we live our lives as a response to the truth that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Don't misunderstand- we *need* action. Living requires action, and living a God-centered life requires a certain kind of action. The question isn't whether to act, but from whence action proceeds. A life lived in response to the gift of God's presence in our lives is a life of selfless action. It's a life where action proceeds from God's blessings, where strength proceeds not from might or earthly power but from the sure knowledge that there are worse things than death, worse things than being arrested, worse things than losing a friend for speaking truth to power. It's a life where love guides our response, a life where we seek Christ in others and work diligently to loose the bonds of oppression wherever they reside.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The hard kernel that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus has the power to grow into a life lived in loving response to God's grace. This week, I invite us all to pay attention to God's presence in our lives, to put on childlike wonder at the gifts of Creation, of our humanity, and of Jesus. Spend time being amazed at how wondrous God is, marvel at the nearness of God's Kingdom the way a child marvels at a growing seed, or a baker relaxes and rejoices when the bread rises *just right*. Let's allow ourselves to be so moved by the awesomeness of God that we can at least imagine giving up everything else to spend more time with this treasure, this pearl. Only then can we act, only then can we begin to strive for justice and peace.