

26 July 2020

Introduction

In today's gospel Jesus offers everyday images that reveal to us the reign of God: a tree that becomes a sheltering home, yeast that penetrates and expands, a treasured pearl, a net that gains a great catch. Even as we seek the riches of God's reign, the great surprise is that God's grace finds us first!

Prayer of the Day

P Beloved and sovereign God, through the death and resurrection of your Son you bring us into your kingdom of justice and mercy. By your Spirit, give us your wisdom, that we may treasure the life that comes from Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

C Amen.

Romans 8:26-39

These words celebrate the depth of God's actions for us. Through Christ's death for us and the activity of the Spirit praying for us, we are fused to God's love poured out in Jesus Christ. Nothing, not even death itself, is able to separate us from such incredible divine love.

²⁶The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his disciples proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near!" Here, Jesus offers several brief parables that explore the implications of this announcement for people's lives.

³¹[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

³³He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

⁴⁴"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

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

⁴⁷Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵²And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Sermon

Kingdom Parables

Jesus tells several parables describing God's reign on earth, which also reveal God's character

Jesus didn't invent parables.

But he's made this literary form familiar to us and the western world.

Short, simple stories,
relying on common characters and objects,
to reveal a deeper truth.

Matthew has borrowed the first parable in today's collection from Mark.

And perhaps his reason for telling it as well.

It's about mustard seeds.

Matthew has made editorial changes,
but the message remains intact.

Mark focusses on the seed.
Matthew on the sower,
but in both cases what is reputed to be the smallest of all seeds,
grows into the greatest of shrubs.

Perhaps it represent God's grace,
or faith,
or the fledgling church.

From a small, insignificant, humble beginning,
something bigger;
a place for small, fragile creatures to find sanctuary.

Overall it is Mark who begins his story about Jesus,
calling it a Gospel or Good News,
for all people, including the poor and weak.

God is going to break into the created world,
for the sake of those who live on the margins.

Fresh from his Baptism Mark tells us that Jesus announced
"The kingdom of God has come near!"

And Matthew latches on to this hope, this idea.
beginning with the mustard seed,
but going further.

The parable about the leaven or yeast Matthew has in common with Luke,
almost word for word.

A one liner.

The reign of God on earth is like yeast in a lump of bread dough,
causing the whole loaf to rise.

God starts small,
with a few,
but changes many.

It was the way members of the early church saw themselves.

They had no grandiose plans to convert everyone,
and to create an empire.

But only to be servants;
a source for good, mercy, and love in their communities.

The parables about the field with a treasure buried in it,
and the pearl of great price
are Matthew's alone.

In both stories the reign of God
or the kingdom of heaven
is said to be of such value,
that those few who notice it
will give up everything to have it.

Like Jesus' call to those who would become disciples;
fishermen in Galilee,
family men and women,
a rich young ruler,
those who are asked to pick up their crosses...

God seeks undivided loyalty,
childlike faith.

The one about the net is also Matthew's;
it has no equivalent in Mark or Luke.

Fishermen, perhaps on the Sea of Galilee,
have spread their nets,
and have hauled to shore a great catch.

And in the regular old world they would sort their fish;
the good and saleable in baskets, the bad left to die.

But in the kingdom of heaven the fishermen are to leave this task for the angels.

Which is to say that they are not to be the judges,
who determine what or who is of value,
and what or who is not.

In part because someone else will always see us as bad or worthless fish,
fit to be destroyed.

The Jews living in Judea looked down on Jews living in other parts of the Roman Empire.

Together they look down on the Samaritans,
and the Gentiles.

The rich harboured contempt for the poor,,
the healthy loathed the sick and injured,
the well-educated over the illiterate,
city folk above country bumpkins,
merchants better than fishermen.
N95 mask wearers superior to disposable mask wearers.

To which Jesus says
"Judge not, that ye may not be judged."

Jesus speaks to a people certain that God is a hard and cruel judge,
who reacts the way some victims of such abuse
become angry, nitpicking judges over others.

The cycle continues from one person to another,
from one generation to the next.

And Jesus tell us, in the parable about the net,
to break this destructive pattern.

Some would also call the last little bit another parable,
about scribes or lawyers who rely on old and new,
precedent and innovation.

It's also the work of Matthew, alone.

And whether we call it a parable or not
it seems to tell us that those who are like mustard seeds,
or yeast,
or someone who buys a field to have its treasure,
or a perfect pearl,
or fishermen who are told not to let the angels sort their catch,
the citizens of the kingdom of heaven
value tradition
and seek new ways to be faithful to God.

Like singing old familiar hymns on Zoom.

Or heeding the call of the ancient prophets
and becoming allies with those who have been shoved to life's margins.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

P Confident of your care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

A Merciful God, when your Word is spoken, it gives light and understanding. Increase our appreciation and wonder in the midst of your creation. Support the work of conservationists and those who seek to protect what you have made. Inspire scientists to detail the intricacy and relationships among all living things. Lord, in your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

A Merciful God, your reign is revealed to us in common things: a mustard shrub, a woman baking bread, a fishing net. Help your church, including those who visit our camps this summer, witness to the surprising yet common ways you encounter us in daily life. Lord, in your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

A As the birds of the air nest in branches of trees, gather the nations of the world into the welcoming shade of your merciful reign. Direct leaders of nations to build trust with each other and walk in the way of peace. Protect the vulnerable from so called "strongmen" and dictators. Lord, in your mercy,
C **hear our prayer.**

A Your Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for the saints according to your will. Guide us when we do not know how to pray. Give comfort to the dying, refuge to the weary, justice to those who are oppressed, and healing to the sick (*names presented before worship*). Lord, in your mercy,
C **hear our prayer.**

A In the midst of this pandemic we commend our fears and frustrations to us, that you might lighten our burden. Comfort the dying, heal the infected, renew their care-givers, accompany those whose movements are restricted, and help the leaders of business and industry to balance a return to work with safety. Lord, in your mercy,
C **hear our prayer.**

A You show steadfast love and direct us to ask of you what we need. Help this congregation ask boldly for what is most needed. Refresh us with new dreams of being your people in this place and time. Lord, in your mercy,
C **hear our prayer.**

Here other intercessions may be offered.

A In you our lives are never lost. Strengthen us by the inspiring witness of your people in all times and places. Embolden our witness now, and one day gather us with all your saints in light (*especially*). Lord, in your mercy,
C **hear our prayer.**

P In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
C **Amen.**

Invitation to Communion

Friends of Jesus, come to the table.
Receive nourishment for your journey.

Prayer after Communion

God of the welcome table,
in this meal we have feasted on your goodness
and have been united by your presence among us.
Empower us to go forth sustained by these gifts
so that we may share your neighborly love with all,
through Jesus Christ, the giver of abundant life.

Amen.

Blessing

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.
God, the creator, ✝ Jesus, the Christ,
and the Holy Spirit, the comforter,
bless you and keep you in eternal love.

Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Christ is with you.

Thanks be to God.