

Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Pentecost 8A; 7/26/20
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As Lutheran Christians, our theology is rooted in an understanding of the cross. As such, our understanding of God's presence to us in Jesus Christ focuses on what it means to walk the way of the cross and carry the cross. This also means that we name a *thing* or *situation* for what it is, and we do **not** preach a theology of glory and false optimism. Therefore, I am going to name and be honest about the cross we are presently carrying. We are experiencing some very challenging, painful, fearful days. And, this cross we presently bear is heavy as we grieve the lives of over 147,000 Americans who have died from the Coronavirus, a number that is greater than two and a half Viet Nam wars. It is a very heavy cross we bear when we understand it did not have to be this way! So, for me, this grief is substantial and, as I said last week, there is a deep, deep longing within me for the Kingdom of God to be fully realized, NOW! Quite honestly, if we have any sense of empathy as we look at what is happening in our country, the pain and grief seem intense.

At times when we experience intense pain and grief, God seems to be hidden and we often ask the question, "Where is God in the midst of this?" So, it is fitting that we receive today's life-giving word from Romans because, in this passage, St. Paul essentially is asking the same rhetorical

question. And, in his answer to this question, we receive some of the most assuring words of comfort that we can ever find in scripture as Paul writes:

....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.

Now, while these words provide immense comfort, I think we still **seek** visible signs of God's presence to us, visible signs of God's reign and God's justice breaking into this world. We long for the dream of God, for God's kingdom and presence to become realized in this world and in our lives. However, we tend to look for God in all the wrong places. We tend to look for God somewhere out there, up in the heavens or someplace far away. So, today, **Jesus'** words help us better understand the way in which the Kingdom of God is **already** breaking into our lives but not yet fully here.

Today, Jesus continues to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, the way we talk about God and the way God **is** at work in this world. And, his words are rather surprising. He does **not** describe a kingdom that is far off in the distance, in some exalted place up there or somewhere out there. No, he describes the reign of God by using analogies that are literally **very down to earth** – a mustard seed, some yeast, a thief, and a merchant. In

his stories, he uses examples of an annoying seed and a corrupt agent. He describes qualities that seem hidden, and he uses some rather corrupt characters in the process.

The parable of the mustard seed is one of the best known of Jesus' stories. Mustard seeds are so small they are almost weightless. They can easily go unnoticed. They can lie hidden and undetected in a large sack of other seeds. I can imagine an unsuspecting farmer unwittingly sowing a mustard seed in his field as he is sowing wheat.

Mustard is in fact a **wild** weed. It is something farmers would try to get **out** of the field because, once it is sown, it is hard to get rid of. Jesus uses the example of a bothersome weed that grows from a small, hidden seed but, when germinated, becomes a huge bush that tends to take over the field. Jesus is describing the way God is at work in this world. And, he compares it to a miniscule, annoying seed that can hardly be seen, but grows and is transformed into a life-giving tree as it becomes a leafy haven where the birds can make their nests. In this little parable, unnoticed beginnings of the work in the kingdom of God are contrasted with great, even surprising results. Have we been looking for God in all the wrong places?

Then, Jesus goes on and uses another example - yeast or leaven. Yeast was an **unwanted** agent. It is something that bloats and rots corpses. It is also something women would attempt to get rid of when cleaning their homes in preparation for Passover. In Jewish tradition, yeast was a symbol of corruption and impurity. It was considered evil and unclean. However, in Jesus' parable, we find out that **yeast** becomes **the** agent of miraculous growth of God's kingdom and it permeates **every part** of the dough. Like a woman who spoils the flour with yeast, God is fermenting the Kingdom of Heaven within this world, within our communities, and within each one of us. That kingdom permeates **all** of creation and it has transforming power in this world. Now, considering these stories, do we have eyes to see God's reign hidden in everyday life? Are we able to trust God's transforming presence and love in our everyday life? Or, are we too often looking for God in all the wrong places?

In the next little story, Jesus uses the analogy of a deceitful thief. He tells the story of a man who discovers treasure buried in someone **else's** field. The man then quickly sells all that he has so he can buy that field from this other guy without telling the owner about the treasure. Now, I really must wonder what this crooked man was doing digging around in someone else's field in the first place. Yet, in light of Jesus' story, I ask, is

God like that thief who gives up **all** God has to buy the **whole** field, simply to possess that treasure and claim it and the **entire** purchase as God's own? Can we picture a God with so much grace?

Jesus just continues telling one yarn after another. His next one is about a pearl merchant. Now, merchants were **not** held in highest esteem in ancient culture. In this little story, Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a merchant searching for that one pearl of great value. When he **joyfully** finds it, he sells everything he has in order that he may buy that one pearl. Essentially, this merchant puts himself **out of business** by radically selling all he has so that he can make the ultimate purchase. So, as we think about his story, I ask you, "What is the most radical act through which we see God's immeasurable love for this broken world?"

As we move through Jesus' stories, we come to the Parable of the Dragnet. When the net is cast into the sea it catches **all** kinds of fish, good and bad. The fishermen indiscriminately pull in all the fish and wait to sort them out later. In our world, the good, the shady and the bad **do** exist together, even within our own selves. And, in our world, we often spend too much time trying to figure out who is in and who is not. I have to say, if those fishermen are willing to pull in all sorts of fish and have them sorted

later, I think we can let God take care of the sorting in God's own good time because God is the one who **loves** us the most.

Jesus uses examples of unscrupulous people and questionable items to describe God at work in this world in surprising ways. Today, Jesus shares some staggeringly good news. The reign of God is **not** far away, but very close at hand. It is present to us, between us as people of God, and even within us. And, in the person of Jesus, we find the **God of creation, not far off**, but **incarnate** and present to us in human form. We need not go searching or looking somewhere out there for God, the **author** of love, because the truth is that God's kingdom is closer to us than the air we breathe. God **is** at work in each one of us, even in those parts of ourselves we want to hide. God is even embracing **our** very own brokenness and transforming us in the process.

So, as I name the painful cross we are presently experiencing and bearing, I also name and rejoice in the surprises of God's Kingdom, present even in the pain: the work of our Parish House project as we now have six guys living there, and the new ministries that are forming within our community. God's Kingdom **is** being born in new ways. And, I rejoice that together we know this truth: **nothing** will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that **holds** us, the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.