

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD AND FROM OUR SAVIOR WHO IS JESUS THE CHRIST. AMEN.

The miracle in these parables is this: God wants us to get it.

God wants us to get the good news of a life with God beyond our understanding, too big to grasp, too mysterious to comprehend. But still, God wants us to get it.

God isn't going to stop trying to find ways to reveal the kin-dom of God to us; always reaching out to expand and deepen our embrace of God's loving will.

God isn't going to let a global pandemic separate us from God's love, from God's getting thru, or from God's love for the world. God finds a way.

When nothing else was getting through to us, God sent us Jesus: God the movie. God, teaching and healing and calling out injustice; God in human form to walk and talk it out with us. Jesus shows us how God's way and rule gets lived out in the broad shape of our human reality.

If Jesus were in preaching class today his rapid-fire collection of pithy stories would get critiqued by the professor as "grapeshot": our technical term for throwing out a bunch of stuff and hoping SOMETHING in there hits someone as good news.

But that's exactly what Jesus is doing, I think. Because not only is the reign of God bigger and wilder than anything we ever imagined but it's not any one thing. It doesn't come to us in any one specific time-bound way.

God wants us to get it, and gives multiple ways in that may work for us, but also gives us the kin-dom in a way that we're not ever going to box God in, exactly, either. We're not going to be able to say it's just or only this... always just or only this. We're always going to be discovering God's will and ways.

So we get "twin parables" about seemingly opposite things that God's rule is supposedly like.

It's like treasure you stumble on without looking for it at all.

And it's like that thing you have been diligently searching for.

Those are two really different ways to come upon the treasure of God. But in both cases the result is the same: the value of life with God is so apparent, that the stumbling day laborer and the discerning business owner alike go with joy to give everything they have to possess it. Together. All they have, happens to be enough.

The reign and rule of God comes among us when we go looking for it...and it also comes to find us. Both. Yes.

And being part of it is always worth the investment. It's worth it all. It's worth everything. It is, everything. Is that what any of you need to hear today?

The reign of God is big and powerful... but small and nurturing at the same time. It's anti-empire. It does grow exponentially, with fantastic yield... but not into a people-crushing, soul-crushing, high-powered organization that caters to the elite and privileged at the top. It's not that kind of kingdom.

The mustard seed thing for instance. You can almost hear Jesus' disciples panting with eagerness for the kingdom as they hear, "Life in God's rule is like the little seed, the tiniest of seeds, really, that grows into... "

and here the disciples might have expected: "the legendary Cedars of Lebanon." Or mighty redwood. The biggest trees alive. Or at least a righteous oak.

See, this is what they are needing to hear. They are poor, oppressed, beleaguered people. They are an occupied country and taxed to death by Rome... a mighty empire getting richer and richer while the poor get poorer. They are daily being harassed, physically and mentally by the Roman soldiers, and the threat of imprisonment. They press in more and more eagerly on Jesus for his good news of the kingdom of God. "And the tiny mustard seed becomes... a glorious shrubbery!"

They are incredulous. "A shrub Jesus? You're telling me the kingdom of God will grow into a bush?"

"Well, a small tree, really," qualifies Jesus.

"But," they may have asked him, "how is a small tree going to crush Rome, give us victory over the evil empire?"

Well, the rule of God isn't so worried about beating the snot out of the Roman Empire so much as interested in growing instead a human community attuned to the scale and nurturing needs of its smallest ones and most vulnerable citizens.

"Look here," Jesus redirects: "this rather glorious bush is big enough to make a humble, relaxed and happy home, a safe and refreshing nesting place for the little creatures. That's where God's eye is... on the sparrow. Life with God is concerned less with what the mighty empire is doing. Empires will always be doing what they will. I'm not here to overthrow Rome. At least not the way you think".

"Here's where the real game is," says Jesus: "how concerned God's people are for sheltering the little ones. And that game is won by growing the volume of people lifting their voices for THAT life. Rolling up their sleeves and kneading, creating the incubator for a rising up!"

Once again, yeast is a small grain that multiplies. What we have is enough. Jesus has been on that for a few weeks now, trying to teach us about God's expansive ways among us. But on the other hand, three measures of flour is a huge amount. God is like a woman who is baking for a crowd. Leavening that much flour would yield about 150 loaves of bread.

Now, if you were going for an abundant, hearty meal the disciples might have been more interested in the rule of God being like a liege lord who assembled his subjects for a fabulous pig roast with generous tankards of mead and ale! But no. It's a simple meal of the staff of life. But in generous proportions: as though a crowd is expected at Café Immanuel. Or at zoom worship.

We've heard about three measures of flour in an old story we heard earlier this summer. When Abraham sees three strangers appear in his oasis at the Oaks of Mamre, he runs to the tent to tell Sarah to get... three measures of flour ready for baking bread... enough to yield 150 loaves!

Do you remember what those three strangers are there for? To bring news from God that Sarah would have a child through which not only Abraham but all peoples would be blessed. What do you think Jesus is getting at, by suggesting the kin-dom of God is like a woman who gets three measures of flour ready, and bakes for a crowd in the midst of the good news of a child being born as a blessing?

What do you think the disciples made of this story later, after Jesus took and blessed and broke bread and told them he was the bread of life, and his body would be food for the world?

So the kingdom of God is small, but abundant; generous, but basic to life. In that, I see good news that this is exactly the time for the smaller congregation. It's not about size as in earthly empires, but size in expecting a crowd, in being nimble, ready with a faith that feeds the strangers coming our way. Ok. Maybe I've got that.

I'd like to stop there. But Jesus doesn't. He wants to gather it all up now, so that the ways of God are like a big net that just scoops up everything. The net doesn't discriminate. It just puts it out there and lets what comes, come. Fish of every kind. And once again, we want to know why Jesus would advocate for that. Just letting the seed fall where we know full well the word has no chance. Just letting those weeds just grow up with the good and righteous wheat. And now these indiscriminate fish gathered up without any sensible regard. And once again, we get a glimpse of God's open arms of grace. God's wild, hopeful, risky desire that the whole world will come to God.

Like the disciples, we are impatient. We long for evil empires to be crushed with God's shock and awe, not with talk of glorious shrubs. We want those weeds of evil infesting our world and those bad fish stinking up the joint out of there. Paul gives us a whole list of them: here's one... how about the power of death. Or what life throws at us for that matter. Rulers, bosses, the powers that be. Pandemics being top of the list, poverty and disparate social determinants of health including environmental concerns, and the cruelty of cancer, alz, ms, aging, again, you name it.

While we want to separate these things from our human experience, Paul reminds us that none of them can separate us from the love of God, the way of God, the life with God, we inherit through our baptisms into Christ. God's always finding a way to gather, grow and sustain us, pandemic notwithstanding.

We hear from Jesus of the desire of God that the intimacy of the small, sheltering bush will make a difference for little ones otherwise trampled and forgotten. That the crowds of strangers will enjoy the blessing of heavenly food... leaven, (us! God's stealth plan) hidden in the flour (ta-da!), that will infect the whole shebang and raise life-giving wholesomeness and satisfaction within the world. We hear that those who stumble upon, and those who discern alike the value of God's ways, will give their all for it in joy. We see the net... and all those caught up in it without even knowing what hit them.

We see God's risky gamble here. God's fervent hope the world will come to wholeness and that evil will be subsumed in the power that comes with love. God gives us chance after chance after chance. That's the way of God among us in Jesus.

Jesus promises he'll give it to the end of the day... so the whole world might be made whole in God's love, and roped into God's project in loving and sustaining nurture for the least. But at the end of the day, at the end of the day, we are promised we will live free of those evils of this world. We will be citizens of a kin-dom where there will be no more sorrow, no more crying, no more dying, no more violence, no more despair, no more injustices, no more fear, no more crushing poverty or disease.

"Yes," they say.

I'm not so sure. But I hope that you heard something old today. The old story of God's love, and the miracle that this love is enough to sustain worried lives, small congregations, and unity in the midst of diversity.

And that you've also heard something new: a living word for our world today, of a shelter, abundance, the joy of giving all we have for the treasure of our life with God, and a risky wild love that invites that stranger in to bring us good news of life and love. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Kim L. Beckmann
Immanuel Lutheran Church of Evanston
July 26, 2020