

## *Everything Counts in Small Amounts*

*Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52*

I've been having conversations with people over the last month where a lot of people are feeling a bit disconnected from their faith, from God, and I'm wondering if any of you are feeling that way as well. I wonder, do these words from Romans speak to you today? When Paul writes: "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought." Are you feeling like something's missing or that maybe you're not doing the right thing? Your prayers are not answered? Do you feel that something is just missing from your life, that every day just seems to blend into the next one? If so, then hear these words again from Paul. Let them sink deeply into your heart. These words come from a different translation from *The Message*:

"Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside us, helping us along. If we do not know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. The Spirit does our praying in and for us. Making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. The Spirit knows us far better than we know ourselves and keeps us present before God. That is why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good."

As I was reading this particular passage from Romans this week, I was reminded of one of my favourite mystics named Julian of Norwich. Julian of Norwich lived from 1452-1416. During her time, she lived through the Plague. She spent most of her time in a cell attached to a church in Norwich, England. She truly wanted to live a life that was extremely aesthetic, a contemplative life. One where she was completely dedicated and devoted to God. Her whole focus was on God, so much so that she wrote a book entitled *Revelations of Divine Love*. She believed that we underestimate God's love. And perhaps she is right. She wrote:

"God made everything that is made for love, and the same love sustains everything and shall do so forever. Since God is everything that is God, and God has made everything that God has made, then God loves all God has made. For in those who shall be saved, all is included."

Julian of Norwich, like the Apostle Paul, believes in her heart that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The series of parables that Jesus shared with the disciples today ends with Jesus asking them if they understood. How will these parables help us to understand God at work in our midst? To help us to understand that God is with us and loves us – constantly and unconditionally, no matter what we do. How will these parables get us to dig deeper into what Jesus is teaching us? And what lies hidden from our eyes or is at work without our knowledge?

If you were to describe the kin-dom of heaven to someone, what would you say? How would you describe the kin-dom of heaven? A child once said, “The kin-dom of heaven is like a garden.” Every different thing in that garden grew and became something that helped to feed and nourish something else. Describing God, describing the Spirit, describing a moment of spiritual significance is sometimes challenging for us. Perhaps this is why Jesus told not one, not two, but five different parables for the disciples before asking them if they understood. Think about it: do one of those parables speak to you more than another?

I believe that Jesus used parables as a way of teaching so that the seeker needed to dig deeper. Couldn't simply accept it and say, “I know exactly what you're saying,” but actually had to think and internalize what was going on. It also provides the seeker with a sense of openness; an opportunity to not be influenced by a leader, but to simply take it and chew on it and pull it apart and try and figure out what it means to them as a person. And in doing so, each person will discover many treasures. I bet if I asked each and every one of you, you would all have a slightly different answer. And that is what the kin-dom of God is all about. It's about discovering the many treasures. The many invitations and seeds that God has planted in each and every one of us. And that each and every seed is precious.

Over the past few weeks, we have heard parables that Jesus told to great crowds of people. The series of parables that Jesus tells today are actually spoken just to the disciples. These parables speak to the blessings that await the righteous: those who accept Jesus' revelation and follow it. Jesus chooses things that are common to human life, and what I found really interesting is that during the time when Jesus lived on earth, the mustard seed, which grows into a shrub, was not highly regarded in one's garden. It was considered a weed, a shrub bush that consumed valuable garden space. Leaven and yeast were also not the same coveted yeast that we have today. In the scripture, though, leaven was universally understood as something that was evil and unclean, and could be fatal. Yeast symbolized corruption and impurity. One theologian stated the following: that “this scripture passage contains four parables of subversion, and

also a parable of sorting and final judgement.”<sup>1</sup> So the first four were about a mustard seed, about yeast...then it was about a thief, and then a merchant, and each of those parables, I think, are quite challenging. Matthew is challenging faithful followers of Christ to take a long, hard look at what it means to be a disciple. What it takes to be a disciple. These parables do not allow us to avoid taking a look at sin and judgement. These are challenging times that we live in. The teachings of Jesus continue to challenge us today. *And* there is hope. There is promise in these teachings.

In one of our statements of faith – which we will explore in the membership classes starting today – *A New Creed* says:

“We proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen. Our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone.”

In the more recent faith statement, *A Song of Faith*, it says the following:

“We surrender ourselves to sin, a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice or apathy. Becoming bound and complacent in a web of false desires and wrong choices, we bring harm to ourselves and others. This brokenness of human life and community is an outcome of sin. Sin is not only personal, but accumulates to become habitual and systemic forms of injustice, violence, and hatred.”

These statements in the creed, like the parables that Jesus spoke to the disciples, invite us to remember and acknowledge that what we do and do not do in our life counts. And at the same time, I think we can find comfort in the unconditional love of God and the fact that God’s grace is freely given to us. We do not need to be afraid of being vulnerable before God. Sharing with God our mistakes, our confessions. Naming the things that we have done wrong, things we haven’t done. When we turn to God, we can trust in the promise that we are not alone. That God is listening to us. That the Spirit is naming what we need to name. God is there, helping us to repent, and when we do, we are transformed.

Talitha J. Arnold writes: “If God can use a mustard seed” – remember a mustard seed being a weed – “and corrupt leaven to grow the kin-dom, imagine what God can do with us.”<sup>2</sup> God can use the smallest of things and find the abundance in it, transforming something insignificant into something that is life-giving like a tree that can hold the birds. Or the leaven that can feed thousands through bread. Jesus asked the disciples at the end, “Have you understood this?” and they said, “Yes.” Jesus didn’t question them in that moment, but trusted that they have received what they needed to in that moment. What have you understood from these teachings. Jesus says several times that the kin-dom of God is here on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Peluso-Verdend, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 286.

Now, as an aside, we often change the language from “kingdom”, which you often hear in the Bible, to “kin-dom”, because I think it is a better word to reflect the kind of society that Jesus envisioned. One that is a shared community of equals who serve each other. Whereas in kingdom, it is often imagined that we are serving one person: the king. So in Matthew, he says, “The kin-dom of heaven has come near.”

God is accessible, is what we are hearing. God is here and now. God is found in every facet of our daily lives. Jesus transforms our lives, not by scaring us, but by loving us and by helping us to see and understand that heaven is close at hand; it’s here. If we imagine ourselves as a mustard seed or yeast, a thief or a merchant, our faith in God transforms into something that is nurturing, of great value, treasured and alive. What once was hidden must now be found and then shared in the world. The kindom of heaven is not a possession. It does not provide you with wealth and power. It is a resource that is freely shared and freely given. We have the responsibility, as faithful followers of Christ, to share that as widely as we can. The kindom is embraced by the marginalized, the unclean, the left out. The kindom of heaven has so much to offer us, even before we see it or find it. It is Jesus who reveals it to us. There is so much potential in ourselves, hidden potential in this faith community. In the community in which we serve and in the world. So how do we help to discover it? How do we find the hidden abundance in our midst?

These truly are uncertain times, and we as a faith community are trying to discern where we are going. Where we see the world change, and where we recognize that being a faithful follower of Jesus may not be the norm, but it is what we are called to do. Perhaps you are aware that many churches are closing. Perhaps you fear this time of uncertainty. Will we, in these moments of uncertainty, underestimate the love of God? Or will we lean into the Spirit, trusting that even when we don’t know what to pray or how to proceed, that it is the Spirit that will intercede. That God will hear our prayers, both spoken and unspoken. Will we share our faith stories with each other? And will we listen deeply to the sighs and longings of the people sitting next to us? The people sitting out on a bench? Paul assures us today, as does Julian of Norwich, that there is a deep interconnectedness with God, with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and with all of humanity. Even when we feel weak and isolated from God, both Julian of Norwich and the Apostle Paul lived in the same uncertain times. And it was their faith that sustained them; that gave them the courage to say what they needed to say and to live how God called them to live. Their faith gave them the assurance that they could live a life of love. To see hidden abundance, and to trust in God to guide them.

So what will your choice be today? Will you trust that even something insignificant that you do in your life, a choice that you make can actually make a difference in this world? Will you trust that if we listen to each other's stories, that we will hear that the Spirit is alive and well in our midst? That there are gifts and abundance here waiting to be shared with all. Will you underestimate God's love, or will you trust in that love today? I choose trust, and I hope you will too.