

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE 16<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 23 July 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today's readings from the Liturgy of the Word have a delicate, profoundly moving balance. The psalm and the first reading from the book of Wisdom describe who God is and, since we are made in God's image, who we must be in our interactions with each other. The three parables spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew show the kin-dom of God as it is reflected in images from our material world. In the first readings, we are imaged in God's way of being; in the Gospel, God is imaged in our way of being. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, confidently reminds us that we have the presence of the Spirit to help us find our pathway through all of this.

In Psalm 86, the psalmist quotes God's description of Godself in Exodus 24, "For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. . . But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ps 86:5, 15). This God will love us no matter who we are or how we fail. This God will forgive us no matter how we fail as long as we repent. In the second last verse of the psalm, we hear the tender, trusting, inclusive words, "Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving-maid" (Ps 86:16). This God, who is above all gods, cares for everyone, even those whom society deems less important or valued – the servant or the child of the serving-maid. Martin Luther King Jr. says so poignantly:

All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.



In the book of Wisdom, Woman Wisdom speaks confidently to God as one who does not judge unjustly, whose strength is a source not of control but of righteousness, who judges with mildness, who governs with great forbearance (Ws 12:13, 16, 18). In acting in this way, God teaches us "that the righteous must be kind," and "filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sin" (Ws 12:19). God not only uses power for good, but God teaches us that we too must act in this manner not only with righteousness but with kindness. "God has told

you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks many parables, but the three parables in today's passage are not only profound in their own right but teach in their connectedness with each other. All three are describing the kin-dom of heaven, all three reflect the kin-dom of heaven present now and not in some future time, all three use Earth images, all three relate to food (two speak specifically about bread, a food eaten by people in every country on Earth), all three speak to the power of the "small," the "little"; and all three parables highlight inclusion. In the passage, Jesus reminds us that parables are meant to be perplexing, making meaning well beyond what appears on the surface. This requires that we look deeply, "Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt 13:43).



The first parable speaks to the wheat and the weeds, with a householder who cares enough to sow the seed himself despite his having slaves. This farmer will not allow the slaves to cut out the weeds “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat with them” (Matt 13:29). Instead, he tells them to let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. Then he finds use for the wheat which will be gathered into the barn and the weeds which will be burned as fuel. What is Jesus teaching us here?

Is it possible that Jesus is first reminding us that it is not simple to distinguish the good from the bad – in people and in situations? Is it possible that Jesus is reminding us that what we see as weeds around us may indeed have another purpose which we had not seen before? Is it possible that Jesus is telling us that it may be our weeds that become the source of life-giving energy for us? Steve Garnaas-Holmes says this so well:

Oh, how we want to be among the wheat  
at the last judgment, gathered and bundled off to heaven,  
not separated out to be burned!

As If Jesus is talking about others—  
you know, those bad people—and not you,  
not what in you yourself is good and bad.

Maybe God lets you discern what is fruitful in you  
and blesses it; and what is not fruitful,  
if you are willing, God graciously, thankfully, removes.

Maybe we shouldn't be ripping out weeds  
because we don't know what's weeds and what isn't;  
we don't really know what's good or bad.

Maybe, though we'd love to get rid of those we hate,  
we shouldn't, because we actually also depend on them,  
and removing them would uproot us, too.

Maybe we should go easy on our judgments because  
we have no idea what wounds or burdens people bear,  
so that what seems evil to us is actually pretty good for them.

Maybe it's not that we shouldn't judge  
but that we can't: we can't know  
what grace lurks in even the worst person or situation.

Maybe resisting evil and injustice is so hard  
because there are weeds of hate and fear in our own hearts

and sorting that out is hard and humbling.  
Maybe the stuff in your life that seems bad  
is also graced, and your work is  
to glean the fruit from it.

Maybe God is so present in everything  
that even despite the vilest evil  
grace is always possible.

The second parable is that of the mustard seed, the “smallest of all seeds.” The wonder of this parable is that it is not focused on humans. Rather the mustard seed becomes first a shrub and then a tree in which “the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matt 13:32). Remember that Jesus is giving us here an image of the kin-dom of heaven!

The third parable is yet another reminder that we are all created in the image of God as Jesus uses the woman baker leavening her bread with yeast. The hard and unending work of feeding a family, activity usually carried out by women, is seen to be an image of the kin-dom of heaven. The experience of women is an image of the life-giving and creating work of God!

All three parables speak about little things: the seed being sown, the mustard seed, the yeast. John Kavanaugh sj summarizes the wonder and the hope of the little becoming life-giving:



What is more, the fruit starts so small. Like one act of love, one time of kindness, one moment of courage, growth is imperceptible in the seeding. The mustard seed, once so tiny, becomes a great shrub, the home to wayfaring birds of passage. So it is in Jesus' other analogy for the reign of God: a bit of yeast permeates and quickens the batch of flour. Have we not all felt the grace that rises from the least? The early free smile of a child? The first kiss? The initial act of kindness? The fragile promise made with full heart?

Each of us, so inconsequential in history's chamber, so lost in vast spaces measured by light years, bears a power not quantified by weight and measure. The human heart, small and frail by cosmic standards, rises to heights out of its very frailty when it loves, hopes, and believes. This is what the reign of God is all about. And it is in our hearts that God's Spirit moves. That tiny instant, in which we began, bears fruit, not only in a lifetime that itself is small, but in love that inhabits a realm beyond the reign of size and number.

Lest all of this become overwhelming to us, Paul brings us comfort in his letter to the Romans, “The 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” (Rom 8:26). The intimacy of these words is almost overwhelming, “The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for word!” God, who creates us, who treats us with righteousness and kindness, who teaches us through the world around us, knows that even all of this is not enough. We need God's very presence through the Spirit within us to be with us in our fears, in our uncertainties, in our sense of inadequacy, in our guilt about our weeds. Just as God will never cease to love us or to forgive us, so, too, God will always be with us.

We use a poem-prayer by Thom Shuman to end these reflections:

God-who-keeps-promises:

every word you have spoken of hope found in the depths of life,  
of healing surprising our pain, of grace jumping rope with children,  
will all come true – even when our stubbornness deafens us to your whispers.

Jesus-who-sows-seeds:

every hope you have for us of kindness never ending,  
of persistent patience, of sacrificial service,  
can be found – even when others cannot see them in us.

Spirit-who-leads-us-into-life:

every dream you have of peace becoming our best friend,  
of joy bubbling from our hearts, of strangers welcomed as kin,  
will happen – even when we insist on living out our fantasies.

Behind us, under us, beside us, over us, you are ever and always with us,  
God in Community, Holy in One.

May the God-who-keeps-promises, the Jesus-who-sows-seeds, and Spirit-who-leads-us-into-life  
be with us in a special way this week, reminding us that each one of us is a small seed that holds  
the wonder and the privilege of reflecting the kin-dom of heaven every single day.



[The Eye of God-Helix Nebula](#)