

July 26, 2020

“Seriously, Nothing?”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Readings:

Romans 8:26-28, 35-39

Likewise 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. And 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. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that 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 our Lord.

Mathew 13:31-33, 44-45

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it 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."

He 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."

"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.

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

This week's gospel reading presents us with more parables. Like we discussed a couple of weeks ago, Jesus uses them as a literary device to make us think for ourselves and to grow spiritually but for the sake of time this week, I just want you to notice how often Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven. All three of these parables open with The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

We know through much exegetical and historical scholarship that even though our scriptures have been translated, mistranslated, added to, redacted from, misappropriated and misused this is something we can authentically know that Jesus did.

He talked a lot about the kingdom of heaven and or the kingdom of God. I do like the inclusive use of the word kingdom in the present day but I think it is important to note that using Kingdom in Jesus's day was an intentional juxtaposition to the Emperor of Rome. A Kingdom or empire based on wealth, military power and abusive control.

Jesus gives us an entirely different vision. In the beatitudes he shows us how upside down from this world the kingdom of heaven is.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The meek the merciful, those that thirst for righteousness, the peacemakers and those persecuted for righteousness, theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

But here's the catch, somehow through the years and some wrong turns in theology “The kingdom of heaven started being interchangeable with Heaven. That place you go after you die and according to church, only after you meet a set of requirements.

Yet multiple times Jesus uses it in the present tense.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand” (Mt 4:17): “The Kingdom of God is very near to you” (Lk 10:10): “I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of Heaven” (Lk 9:27). And back to the beatitudes they read theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.

So the kingdom of heaven or God is the already AND the not yet.

Now we can move onto the Pauline scripture.

“For I am convinced that 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 our Lord.”

Could this be the doorway we can walk through into the kingdom of God in the right here and right now. Accepting this unconditional love, this eternal binding to God, this absolute acceptance of us no matter what happens, no matter what we do or fail to do.

For far too long Christianity has made the future heaven about requirements. Do this and you will get the golden carrot of eternal life, this is not how Christ depicted either the present already kingdom or the future one on the other side of this life.

In this passage Paul depicts God's love for us as completely unwavering, unshakable and unmovable.

So when we feel distant from God, who has done the moving?

Not God but us. The kingdom of heaven is when we turn to God, accept our dependence on God and surrender to that inward knowing of that unconditional love of God.

When we focus our lives, the core of our spirit on that love, even in our suffering we glimpse the kingdom of heaven. The peace that passeth all understanding.

But when we turn away from God, turning our back on that love that is when the despair of being human can consume us, that's when we either think we are nothing or we use the things of this world, wealth, power, materialism, addiction, achievement, hate or superiority to try and replace that peace and love with fleeting moments of satisfaction and it simply can't be done. We are left with an emptiness.

You've heard it before, that emptiness is a God shaped hole that only God can fill.

But here is something beautiful, I remember it like yesterday when I first heard this because it completely changed the way I heard this word. "Repent". I always pictured the street preachers with Signs that say Repent or burn in hell, but in its most basic and original meaning repent simply means. Turn Around.

Just simply turn around, when you are moving far away from this absolute unwavering love, just turn around, When you turn your back on God, just turn around for our God is a God of second chances, and third chances and fourth and to infinity.

In any given day you can turn away and when it gets painful just turn around. Face back toward that sunlight of the spirit, that unending acceptance that you can not be separated from.

Right now folks, we are in a kind of war. Our world has been flooded and soaked in fear. You can't get away from it. That root of fear has been stoked and provoked so that it easily finds its way to hate so it has someplace to go to feel back in control. And then that hate is stoked and provoked and it grows and seethes and permeates everything it touches.

I have never felt so much grief for my nation as I do now. I know I am not alone in this. Sure we all can scrape together moments where we don't feel like we are drowning but then a conversation, an article, a news report, a death toll slips through and that denial of events in our nation crumbles.

We can't seem to hide from the constancy of strong, sarcastic opinions and mean spiritedness. We can't hide from the rising numbers of deaths this virus has caused and we can't hide from the racial disparities, the inequity, and the violence that are a part of every single news cycle.

With no end in sight. It is very hard to see any remnant of the kingdom of God right now.

Yet I look out across this room and I know it is still at hand. The way you all care for each other even in your differences, it is still at hand. The way many of you give unselfishly of your life, and resources. It is still at hand.

I go down to the basement and visit Mark and Nancy on the days I'm here and am surrounded by it. The kingdom of God is in the midst of grocery carts and boxes of food that come in from all over.

I hear it in the gratitude of the people who come and pick up food, knowing that they will survive the week. I heard one woman shyly and humbly say to Nancy, "Thank You, I really mean that, you just don't know what this means". The kingdom of God is still at hand. I am reminded of it when I see the masks freely made and freely given by Mary out there. The kingdom of God is still at hand.

I see it in the fierceness in the eyes of those who protest peacefully, in the quiet acknowledgement as entire baseball teams took a knee on opening day in support of racial equity. I see it in the comfort given to patients with COVID by the medical staff at the hospital.

I'd like you to take some time this week to add your own list to Paul's scripture. It might go something like this "For I am convinced that neither cancer, nor COVID, disability, nor pain, politics nor prejudice, procedures to come or things I've done in the past can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

There are no requirements to experience the kingdom of heaven within yourself and when you touch that grace, let it heal and soothe your fears and answer your sighs too deep for words with this, "it is going to be okay. If not this year then in the next. If not in this life, then in the next".

Then you can go on another day, you can find your words to stand up to hate, you can find your courage to just get up in the morning, you can find your way to reflecting that unshakable, unmistakable, unbreakable love of God to all those who are suffering.

Show it to all who don't have the hope that we are given, who don't know the love, that love that absolutely nothing can separate us from through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Let that love be your balm, let it be your guide, your motivation, your strength, your hope and your courage. Now and always. AMEN

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