

Sermon July 26/20 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, 1 Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-39

Romans 8:26-39

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. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 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.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

[Jesus] put before [the crowds] 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.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

† † †

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Redeemer. Amen

Writing this sermon, I was reflecting on how it’s hard to understand what God’s up to in this challenging time. Then a friend emailed a story that I’d like to share (source unknown):

A while back, I read a story of a visiting pastor who attended a men's breakfast in the middle of a rural farming area of the country. The group had asked an older farmer, decked out in bib overalls, to say grace for the morning breakfast.

"Lord, I hate buttermilk.", the farmer began. The visiting pastor opened one eye to glance at the farmer and wondered where this was going.

The farmer loudly proclaimed, "Lord, I hate lard." Now the pastor was growing concerned.

Without missing a beat, the farmer continued, "And Lord, you know I don't much care for raw white flour."

The pastor once again opened an eye to glance around the room and saw that he wasn't the only one feeling uncomfortable.

Then the farmer added, "But Lord, when you mix them all together and bake them, I do love them fresh baked biscuits. So Lord, when things come up that we don't like, when life gets hard, when we don't understand what you're saying to us, help us to just relax and wait until you are done mixing. It will probably be even better than biscuits. Amen."

There are certainly things we don’t much care for living through a pandemic. Like ‘Lord, I hate buttermilk’. The world news continues to be bleak, even though locally it’s not too bad. It’s hard to “relax and wait”, to believe that anything good can come out of this time.

So on that theme of “when life gets hard, when we don’t understand what you’re saying to us...” - how do we lift up and celebrate the gifts of God? How do we hold those two things in our hands?

This week, as I read different commentaries, I was really struck by how Michael Chan, a professor at Luther Seminary, in Minnesota, held the paradox of living in a dark terrible time, with celebrating the gifts of God which today's scripture readings give us.

[<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5444>]

Well, it's certainly a dark time in the US. Chan, an Old Testament professor, bluntly stated his opinion: we are living in the midst of God's wrath. He writes:

Let's revisit the year so far: COVID-19, the killing of George Floyd, widespread protests demanding for racial justice, impeachment, a fractious Democratic primary, a record-breaking economy followed by a rapid, self-imposed shutdown, widespread job loss, backlogged medical procedures, swarming locusts on the African continent, democracy under threat in Hong Kong, an ongoing crisis in Syria, brush fires in Australia ... and that's just what came to my mind in the last 15 minutes. I think I can say without risk of overstatement that 2020 has been a meat grinder...

Chan carries on: *It can be strange to read about gifts [meaning God's gifts] while living in an age of wrath, like the one we are currently experiencing. All of creation writhes and groans under the crushing intergenerational weight of human sin, neglect, and indifference. This is what judgment feels like. This is what the "day of the Lord" sounds like, when the roar of the lion can no longer be muffled by the din of denial. This is what happens when we neglect—as Solomon so clearly did—the gifts of wisdom that we have been given.*

You know, I haven't had a Lutheran pastor or professor put it so bluntly. I found it quite provocative.

And what should we think about COVID 19? Looking at our worldwide situation through an Old Testament lens, it feels like one of the ten plagues God inflicted on Pharaoh to force him to free the Israelites from their misery as slaves "let my people go!" Or has humanity, through the "weight of human sin, neglect, and indifference" (as Chan described), created the circumstances where such a virus might flourish. I just don't know.

But Chan didn't stop there, stuck in the negative: Talking about this week's texts, he said, *"God shows up in all of them as a gift-giver."* In Solomon's dream, he gives the gift of wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-12). The kingdom of heaven, that great gift, is buried in a field and folded into dough (Matthew 13). Paul tells us how we discover God in our weakness (Romans 8:26-27), in trouble and hardship (Rom 8:35-39), and of course in Christ's death "for us" (Romans 8:34). *"all of these texts depict a generous, gift-giving God."*

It seems we are living in the midst of a paradox. The gifts of our loving generous God are all around us. And yet it's such a terrible time for so many people. I'm not comfortable with calling it a time of wrath and judgment like Chan. But paradox is difficult; and sometimes we just don't understand what God is up to. Like the farmer with his prayer.

And somehow, this is what God is asking us to do: to live through faith, and not in our emotions. To continue to believe that God is with us, and God's gifts are hidden all around us! As Paul reminds us: no difficulty or enemy can separate us from the love of God through Christ.

God's kingdom of love and mercy, what Jesus described as "the kingdom of heaven" is paradoxical: an upside down reality, so different from the world around us. It's a kingdom where God's justice rules and humans are free from division; no more rich and poor; no more privileged and down-trodden. A world centred in love, as God always meant it to be.

Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as hidden - like a tiny seed planted in the dirt. So full of potential and new life. Jesus described a mustard seed – but here in North America, we might think of the tiny seeds hidden inside a pine cone. And right now, as we live through a pandemic, let's consider the seeds from jack pine and lodgepole pine.

This is another of the Creator's paradoxes: the heat and terrible damage caused by forest fires are exactly what the waxy jack and lodgepole pinecones need to release their seeds. *Plus fire also produces favourable conditions for those seeds to germinate. Nutrients are released in the soil, mineral soil is exposed, competing species are eliminated and the amount of sunlight on the forest floor is increased. Both jack and lodgepole pine depend on the disaster of forest fires to regenerate.* <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/our-natural-resources/forests-forestry/wildland-fires-insects-disturban/forest-fires/fire-ecology/13149>

God will be with us as we live through this time of COVID19. Let's remember: "*all things work together for good for those who love God.*" (Romans 8.28a)

And when living in paradox is just too confusing and difficult, let's remember the simplicity of the farmer's prayer:

"But Lord, when you mix them all together and bake them, I do love them fresh baked biscuits. So Lord, when things come up that we don't like, when life gets hard, when we don't understand what you're saying to us, help us to just relax and wait until you are done mixing. It will probably be even better than biscuits. Amen."

Blessings

Pastor Ann Krueger

July 26, 2020