

Proper 12 Sermon: Church of Reconciliation: 07/26/2020

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Good Morning, I am so happy to return to Reconciliation, even if only in virtual form, and I am very grateful for Josh and Judy having invited me. So much has happened in the world and in our community since Erika and I were last able to worship with the Reconciliation family. It my deepest hope and prayer that all of you are well and continuing to labor in the abundant harvest as Rec has always done. We miss you and love you dearly, and we long for a time when we can gather again and connect with one another.

One day, not too long ago, I was on-call. As many of you know, I am a hospice chaplain, and being on call is both a blessing and a curse. I am never quite at ease on call, knowing that an emergent need could come up at any moment—at the same time, it is a privilege to be able to be present with someone during life's most difficult and devastating moments. This one particular day, I remember being called to a death of one our patients very early in the morning, while it was still dark. Having arrived at the family's home, I said a final prayer of commendation and blessing over the deceased, and sat with the family, sharing stories about their loved one, and mainly just sitting with them as they slowly adjusted to the new reality of a world without their loved one. There was nothing I said or did that was particularly special, but it was sacred time. The home I had been called to was on the West Side, so after finishing the visit, I picked up some breakfast tacos and coffee from one of my favorite spots—and as I got on the road toward home, the sun was just beginning to rise, I became tearful, overcome by emotion—it was an experience of both sadness and joy—I felt both a great appreciation for the joy of little things, and also the deep sadness of loss—and the sacredness of being able to hold both together, denying neither, and simply being able to exist in the tension...in those moments, on the drive

home, I felt a kind of expansive love that was empowering, that propelled me even into the rest of my day with hope and greater compassion.

This is perhaps a rather strange story to tell, especially as it does not have a snappy punch-line or witty conclusion as most preacher stories have---I share it because, as I survey my own life, I realize that it ranks among one of my encounters with the Kingdom of Heaven—I have experienced the Kingdom of Heaven in many different contexts, none of which has been predictable. At times I have felt the proximity of the Kingdom after reading novel on a Saturday morning—having sat with a grieving family after a difficult, but peaceful death, having spent time with loved ones over a simple meal, reflecting on the beauty of nature and distant horizons—

Have you experienced the Kingdom of Heaven? It sounds like a straight-forward question, but perhaps it is not so easy to answer. What did the Kingdom look like, sound like, smell like, taste like? How did you know it was the Kingdom—what did it cause you to feel, to think, to do?

Now despite the disciples' confident assertion at the end of our text that they understand Jesus' meaning, I don't think Jesus' parables this morning can be fully interpreted or explained, just as my encounters with the Kingdom and yours cannot be fully explained. I can merely point to my experience that day, for example, and say “something about that morning” spoke of the closeness of the Kingdom. In the same way, Jesus, and all the Hebrew prophets before him, had to use parables, creative stories and poetic images to speak of immensity of the Kingdom of Heaven and the divine reality it points to. Perhaps you yourselves have experienced this—when we experience an encounter with the divine, words fail us, in the same way that the word “God” can never contain the reality it refers to.

That being said Jesus' collection of parables which we heard this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, does offer some fascinating glimpses into the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven and its meaning for each of us and for our time.

Jesus begins with the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the small amount of yeast that is hidden within the flour by the woman. Both images suggest that Kingdom of Heaven is far from a showy, overwhelming, and obvious reality that forces itself upon us in tyrannical power. Rather, the Kingdom emerges out of a place of hiddenness, of smallness, of powerlessness—The Christian faith is full of paradox—it is from a place of littleness and impotence that an expansive, life-giving, and powerful reality grows. It is from a small, dingy manger that God incarnate emerges. It is out of a feeling of humility and fear that Solomon's request for wisdom is granted. And for us, it is often in our most vulnerable moments—the moments when we feel least in control, least powerful—when we encounter the Kingdom, and we are empowered by the Spirit of God. Often in my life, it has been during a season of loss, that I have been filled with a sense of divine love, compassion, and grace, often through the ministry and care of another—filled enough to continue moving forward in hope, faith, and love.

The following parables about the hidden treasure in the field and the pearl of great price speak of the Kingdom as something of so much worth, that courage, risk, and sacrifice are demanded in its pursuit. This pair of parables suggests that an encounter with the Kingdom is at times something hidden that we happen to stumble upon, but also perhaps, the one thing we have sought for many years and finally find after much longing and discipline. However we come across the Kingdom, though, Jesus suggests that when we have tasted of the Kingdom, it is worth pursuing at all costs—in fact, in my experience, when I have had an experience of the Kingdom, it becomes my ultimate concern, crowding out other “priorities.” Our experiences of the

Kingdom may be very similar, or very different—perhaps for you, prayer and meditation, afford you glimpses of the Kingdom which enrich your prayer life even more. Perhaps prison ministry, or ministry among the disadvantaged, has revealed the face of Christ to you, and, having seen it, it calls you into deeper relationship with God and others.

Especially here at Reconciliation, perhaps your encounter with the Kingdom comes by way of interacting with nature and creation, the contemplation of a rich and intricately woven tapestry, the entrancing melody of a song, or a particularly evocative line of lyric poetry—in all of these experiences, the experience of the transcendent, the divine shines through and invites us, even demands from us, greater charity and compassion and grace. In a wonderful poem by the German poet Rilke, the speaker is contemplating a statue, an archaic torso of Apollo—as the speaker gazes and describes the still dazzling life beneath the defaced stone, the descriptive beauty of the statue reaches its climax, and the poem ends abruptly with the words: “You must change your life.”¹ This is the call of true beauty, the enchantment of the true treasure, the costliness of the great pearl—it is the demand of the Kingdom of Heaven—once we have partaken of the sacredness of the Kingdom—we have no choice but to change our lives and to risk more and more for the advancement of the Kingdom.

But how can great art, how can ministry to the disadvantaged, how can prayer, no matter how sincere, truly make a difference in the world, and especially now, when we are distanced from one another and more isolated than ever? Jesus tells us that that “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.” Perhaps now, more than ever, is both a time to recall the strength of our Mothers and Fathers of the global Church, but also to look to new ways of innovating how

¹ Rilke, Rainer Marie. “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Stephen Mitchell and published by Modern Library. © 1995 by Stephen Mitchell.

we engage in the work of the Kingdom—my hope and prayer is that Reconciliation may continue its legacy of love-driven creativity during this time, and that each of you may continue to experience the Kingdom, and that it may continue to excite you and empower you to forsake the trivial and the life-draining in favor of risking deeper connection with God and others. Seek out opportunities for inspiration during this time—do not let yourself be fatigued or burdened—but rather find those sources of life, those encounters with the Kingdom, that widen your vision, fill you with hope, and for which you would gladly pay any price.

AMEN