

Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

How many of you remember “way back” in elementary school, when you learned how to read and write, and maybe had a creative writing class? I remember, at Central Elementary School in Richfield, when my fourth grade teacher Mrs. Pribble taught us how to write our first poem. Do you remember your first poem, or that of a son, daughter, or grandchild? Maybe you could write a poem in the chat bar, while I preach this sermon, about a person you love, or a description of how you have seen God acting with love in the world around you today. Go ahead, write while I talk! So, from elementary school, I recall assignments to describe a pet, or an object, a plant or a flower, with words, such as a “red, red rose”, or a “fluffy, white bunny.” Over time we learned how to describe a song or a person – using words beyond just “beautiful” or “old” or “young”. We had to learn how to use our imaginations and expand our vocabularies to not only describe a person, place or a thing, but eventually, a feeling – which is more challenging, because it’s not just an object, but a concept, a thought, or an idea. You may not be able to do that very well in 4th grade, but that may be when it starts, and the ability to describe your feelings with words can blossom and grow through childhood and adolescence into adulthood – IF it is encouraged, and not stifled. Who knows? You may even become a poet, like William Shakespeare, who wrote love sonnets for his beloved, or Maya Angelou, who described how she – and all of us - will rise out of despair or bondage into freedom, from death to life! The best poetry inspires us to describe our deepest feelings of love for God and for others, and our highest aspirations. This is what the psalms and hymns are so often about – descriptions and word pictures about God, our feelings of joy, lament, sorrow or grief, and our relationship with God!

So today in the gospel you and I are invited to open our eyes and release our imaginations to see and imagine God in the world around us, in Creation, in the plants and animals, mountains, seas and skies, and in the people who seek healing, love and acceptance, and find it in the simplest of treasures. It started in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter five, in the Beatitudes, when Jesus described the people who received God’s blessings – the least imaginable: the poor, the mourning, the meek, and the merciful. He even said, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

Throughout chapter 13 in Matthew we have been hearing the parables Jesus told, stories that taught a lesson about faith and life in the kingdom of heaven. So

what is the kingdom of heaven? It is the kingdom where God reigns, the realm of God, which some call “heaven”. Is heaven a “place” up in the sky, beyond our view? Many of the ancient peoples in scripture conceived of heaven as such a place, high above the clouds, maybe even beyond the stars, from which God and the angels looked down upon human beings. But the new thing that Jesus teaches us is that the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom of God – is also found among us on earth and its creatures, in the simplest daily activities of human beings, EVEN WITHIN US, through faith! It’s not only a “spiritual” realm – it’s here among us!

So over the past two weeks we have heard Jesus describe the kingdom of heaven in poetic terms, such as finding it in a sower sowing seeds in the ground, waiting for the seeds to grow, we know not how except as a gift from God while we sleep! Last week we heard how an enemy, whom we call the devil, attempts to intervene in this growth by infesting us with weeds, but even this intrusion will be resolved in the end by God on the Last Day. So like a poet, Jesus describes how God works in God’s realm in the simplest of poetic terms: *“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.”* How is that for an expansive description about how God works, taking the tiniest of seeds, and making it grow beyond expectations? These days, I have heard of a lot of people baking bread or desserts, with the expanded time they have during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jesus told 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.”*

So how would you describe the kingdom of heaven in the simplest, everyday terms? Could you write a simple poem in the terms you are most familiar with, to describe how God works in your daily life? It’s like a simile or metaphor – “the kingdom of heaven on earth to me is like.....” Go ahead, please write it in the chat bar. Could the kingdom of heaven be like a child flying a kite in spring, safe from fear or harm? Or a butterfly, finally flying free from its cocoon? Why not?

Now, during these days of the covid pandemic, some of our descriptions of the Church, which we often have seen as the realm of God on earth, have changed. In many of our minds, the Church is a holy place, the space where God dwells. So we come to the Church, cathedral, synagogue or temple, to worship and praise God, to make offerings or sacrifices of praise. We feel God’s presence there, in the symbols, the altar, even in the stained glass windows that picture Jesus, God’s

Son, and his life on earth. But now that belief has been challenged. You and I have not gathered in the church to worship for over four months, and we don't know when we will gather physically in church again. If the "church is the people", we are not able to gather physically, so how are we the Church? We long to be in God's presence, so we need God to be present in more places than just a church building! We need to experience God at home with us, or in our communities, or out in nature – breaking free from the church, and out among us, in the world! We also need to "gather" in different ways – not physically!

So we may look inside our homes, at our children and grandchildren, for examples of God's presence and love among us. After all, we worship now on Zoom, and if God is not in the computer, God can certainly be present in the Word of God we read and hear today – from our own family Bibles, in the bread and wine served from our own tables at home or the altars we create. Or we can look out our windows to see the beauty of God's creation in the flowers and trees, the birds and animals we see each day. As we walk about we can feel God's presence in the heat of the day, in the sun as it shines, in the gentle rain as it falls, for we have all of nature as our thesaurus for so many more words of praise! Perhaps a blessing God gives us out of this tragic covid pandemic is that it forces us to look inside, at ourselves and closer at the world and people immediately around us for faith and a glimpse of the presence of God and her kingdom.

So Jesus said "*the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, that once discovered, brings you great joy.*" What treasures of God's kingdom do you see today? What are you seeking in the kingdom of heaven around you? Write those treasures in the chat bar. Somedays for me the kingdom of heaven is like my two granddaughters, discovering a new sound, hearing a new word that makes them laugh, or learning to roll over, crawl, or stand up! The kingdom of heaven can be like finding a new wildflower growing out of a crack in the pavement, bringing life and color to empty, dead space. More seriously, the kingdom of heaven is the treasure found when people learn the truth about their neighbors' lives, and can say *Black Lives Matter* without fear of reprisal or debate. The kingdom of heaven is when we can celebrate the life of prophets like John Lewis, and be inspired by his courage. It's when you can go out into the world and wear a mask out of love for our neighbor, without being accused of being political, and then one day when we can all remove our masks because we no longer are in danger of catching a coronavirus. The kingdom of heaven is when immigrant children are no longer separated from their families on the border, and that day when all of us can travel freely state to state and country to country, without fear. The kingdom of heaven is when all leaders in our nation's capital speak with respect to one another – across party, race and gender - even when they disagree, as an example to all of us. The kingdom of heaven is when armed federal agents

are no longer sent into our nation's cities to disrupt lawful peaceful protests, and it will also be a treasure when one day no one will have to publicly protest against racism and violence in any of our institutions, or for accountability for the police – because we will all live together in peace in one *Beloved Community* for which so many people of faith and courage have given their lives. For the kingdom of heaven is that beloved community of abundance, mercy, peace and harmony which God intends for all of us, if only we would see it, and allow everyone to participate in it. So this kingdom is both a present reality and a future hope!

So one day last week, I went into the Redeemer church building, when it was once again, empty. I opened the front door of the silent sanctuary and looked outside, out of the darkness, into the light. I saw blue skies, and green trees outside that door. Beautiful flowers of many colors – pink, blue, red and white all blooming in the garden and just outside the doors. There was even a single pink petunia stubbornly growing out of a crack in the stone wall beside the front steps! Some of you have seen the photographs I took, as I looked for the beauty of God's creation outside the doors of the church, in the gardens and on the streets. Yes, there were a lot more weeds than other years, when we humans are more present around the place – now I spend my time tending the garden at home! But now even the weeds and wildflowers are blooming with abandon all over the church grounds, adding more splashes of color. I'm sure they are glad to be left alone! And of course, the corn in the Healing Garden on the south lawn has grown higher than my head, and the corn looks ripe for picking. So perhaps the kingdom of heaven is like a church left standing empty for a few months, with its occupants staying home, safely separated from the virus and each other, to live to gather in praise another day. Only the daily ringing of the church bells at noon announce the presence of God's people at Redeemer, connected in cyberspace and in prayer today. So I rang those bells that day, not to announce that the people of God were there to worship, but to send out a reminder in the sound of bells that God is with us all, wherever we are. Not only at noon, but every second of every day. The bells remind us to open our eyes and our ears, to hear and see the evidence of God's kingdom among us, in the small things, in nature and in the people, that we might never have seen before! Let those with ears, listen! Thanks be to God!