

Pentecost 8A

Matthew 13.31-34, 44-52

Sunday, July 26, 2020

Every summer my dad's siblings and their families would descend on our farm in northern Minnesota for a weekend campout. From Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, tents would fill the side yard, campers occupied the north 40, and there was enough potato salad, bars, and brownies to feed an army. Among my cousins, we filled the time with playing 500, swimming and water skiing, and, for a time, playing hide and seek amongst the hay bales within the pole barn. Hiding was such fun. There were so many options and, if you were creative, you could devise a hiding place where no one would ever find you. Sandwiched between the barn wall and a stack of bales, whoever was "it" would walk by you none the wiser. And if you were "it," searching out those who were hidden was a challenging puzzle to solve. It was summertime, and the living was easy. Hiddenness in this context was pure enjoyment.

Hiddenness, however, in our world today is completely different. Oh, that we could go back to the easy days of summers gone by and play a little hide and seek. Now, we live in a world where the hiddenness of a tiny virus makes living so much more difficult and tenuous. There is nothing entertaining about this pandemic. And until a vaccine is found, the game that we are playing is highly contagious, life-threatening, and so much more taxing than the life we led pre-pandemic.

While the hiddenness of a virus may seem like a strange place to start a sermon on parables that Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven, ironically it may be a most apt analog for us. Particularly, the parables of the kingdom of heaven being like a mustard seed or a piece of leaven connect more closely than we may realize to the hiddenness of the Coronavirus and its ubiquitous spread. Of course, the kingdom of heaven and a pandemic are polar opposites. The former is the expression of the fullness of divine presence with us. The latter is a sign of death. Yet, the nature of the virus and its spread, perhaps, underscores as well as anything what Jesus seeks to communicate about the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed, we often hear the parable of the mustard seed, and its meaning seems rather simple: out of something starting very small, the end result is exceedingly large. Allegorically, we would say that God's kingdom may start small--and indeed the early church did just that--yet God's kingdom, in the end, will be amazingly large. Meanwhile, we may interpret the parable of the leaven in a similarly simplistic way. In effect: a little dab will do ya. Especially for those of us who recognize yeast that comes in those small packages and whose granules raise the dough for bread. The smallness of the kingdom has the effect of permeating through the whole world. Again, something small makes a large impact. Seen in this light, the parables are nothing more than descriptions. Yet, Jesus seeks to communicate more.

Indeed, Jesus' use of parables is meant to disrupt our understanding of the world. These stories were meant to challenge the status quo. They were intended to break open the way that we understand the world, and, in this case, the very presence of the divine in the world and beyond. And hiddenness, as well as diffusion, are very much central tenets of these parables. Again, the kingdom of heaven is not like the Coronavirus. However, the characteristics of the virus are

aspects of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus illustrates. Something small grows. Though neither the mustard seed nor the leaven are particularly commendable. On the one hand, one is a weed. The mustard plant. On the other hand, the leaven is hardly small granules in a little package. In the Ancient Near East, the leaven would have been a piece of rotted, moldy bread corrupting the dough, so as to make it rise. Thus, a weed and rotting, moldy bread are the images of the kingdom of God. Not necessarily the optimal sales pitch if you want people to follow you. Indeed, as one commentator notes, “Given the cultural perspectives of Jesus’ day, all these details make it sound like something potentially sinister and furtive is going on.”

So, why does Jesus use these examples to portray the kingdom of heaven? Perhaps, rather than conventional wisdom or the obvious thing, the kingdom of God is something altogether beyond what we expected. The fact that the woman hides the yeast in the bread dough expresses the clandestine and mysterious ways that God’s kingdom works. More to the point, for those in Jesus’ day--and in ours as well--who believe that God’s will is easy to recognize, and those who are a part of the divine plan live a certain way--they go to church, they say their prayers, they don’t mix with others who are too loud or too bawdy or too outrageous, they have another thing coming. Indeed, to all who cavalierly talk as if they know what God is up to and how God is and the very plans that God has in whatever moment they find themselves, need to take a step back. These perspectives may be the furthest thing from the truth. And what we find objectionable, may indeed be the unpredictable movement of the divine.

The hidden nature of all of this is the thing that we return to in the parables. The hiddenness of the mustard seed proliferating so profoundly. The hiddenness of the leaven corrupting the world so completely and, in doing so, involving a whole segment of people that otherwise would not get a hearing or an invitation. Which is exactly what Jesus’ life embodied. A life of welcoming those on the margins. Accepting those who were considered sinners, beyond the pale. Surrounding himself with the base elements of his society, so that the whole project would be hidden in plain sight. No one would dream that anything good could come out of Nazareth, much less among those who followed the itinerant preacher from there.

And, yet, that is the very story of the kingdom of God and the church. Not the obvious choice. Not the preferred people. Not the sanctioned group. Rather, the hidden from sight who enter into the community in the guise of a cheat or a sinner. Hidden from our awareness because of blemishes and imperfections that make us think that *they* would be the last people God would choose. And hidden from our recognition because they don’t act like we think they should or think the way that we think they should or live the way that we think that they should. Yet, this hidden, small, and, ultimately, corrupting group is the very seed and leaven of God’s kingdom. Rather than begrudge them this position. Their existence is a reminder of what makes up the kingdom. Not those who have justified themselves, rather those who are so distraught by their inability to save themselves, that they throw themselves at the mercy of all they have left.

For those who may have everything under control, such a perspective may seem weak and pathetic. For those of us who have ever experienced the loss of our physical faculties, waited at the side of a bed of a loved one whose diagnosis is unclear, lived through the uncertainty of job loss, or held your breath while waiting for a child to return home at night, or any number of other

realities, you know the powerlessness and fragility that is life. And if you find yourself here, then the kingdom of God active as a mustard seed or a piece of leaven is pure promise. It lives, moves, spreads, and has its being amongst us all and it welcomes all, particularly those who would not be on the initial guest list.

The Coronavirus has certainly changed our view of the world and what is normal. It's smallness and spread are humbling. The promise of God's kingdom in the form of a mustard seed or leaven is apt for us to read at this time. Not only is there a resonance between the character of the virus and what Jesus says about the kingdom of God, there also exists an essential distinction. The virus will end. God will not. And the spread of the kingdom will continue ever and always. While we continue to live in the new normal of this pandemic, let us also be heartened and encouraged that the constant normal of God's love continues unfettered, always present, and specifically for you.