

Genesis 29:15-28
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Many of us ... actually, probably most of us ... have been presented with situations that leave us disappointed and frustrated. Maybe it's a situation that we would like to fix, but can't. Or perhaps we've worked really hard to make things come out the way we think they should and we don't succeed. We get annoyed with all the people around us who don't do what they should be doing ... or at least what we think they should be doing. We do our best to do our best, but wonder: Should we keep trying? Should we keep doing what we're doing because we believe it's the right thing to do or should we throw in the towel? It's such a temptation to give up when we're discouraged. We work hard. We give it everything we've got and nothing seems to change. And it occurs to us to wonder "What's the point?" Why should we pour good money after bad or make good effort after failure? What are we *not* seeing in the midst of our disappointment and frustration?

In the gospel lesson that we just heard, Jesus uses five rather simple and straightforward parables to explain to us what we cannot see. He has his work cut out for him. Have you ever considered, for example, how you might describe a sunset to a blind person? It's not easy. Jesus uses several different metaphors to help us understand the nature of the Kingdom of God. You see, as Christians, our conviction is that real meaning is found in God and in the world to come. That's the lens through which we make decisions about how we will live in *this* life. But since we can't see God ... or the world to come ... Jesus explains both to us in terms that we can understand.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The mustard seed, as we know, is extremely tiny ... barely visible to the naked eye. But from it comes a huge shrub that will provide shade and shelter and a place to nest for some of God's creatures. The message: from something very tiny comes something very substantial. What we generally don't hear in this parable is that the mustard shrub is considered a trash tree ... a weed, if you will. And most gardeners and farmers would rip it out as soon as it appeared to allow the cultivated plants to thrive. Since the seed is so small, this little weed bush tends to pop up almost anywhere. And it doesn't pop up in neat, tidy, cultivated rows. So, what are we learning about the Kingdom of God?

What we think of as a weed is something that God uses for good
The Kingdom of God isn't in cultivated, well-tended, orderly rows
Apparently, the Kingdom of God can sprout up anywhere and it grows really fast and out of control

And then Jesus goes on to the next parable. He tells us that the Kingdom of God is like yeast that is mixed in three measures of flour until all of it is leavened. The leaven makes the flour mixture expand to more than twice its size. Now Jesus isn't talking about the yeast that we find in the grocery store in the neat little yellow package. He's talking about leaven ... and leaven in his day and time and in his culture was considered to be bad ... even evil. It was believed to be the agent that rotted corpses. The leaven that was used to make bread was a small piece of dough that was set aside and allowed to spoil. It was the 'starter.' If it was used before it was too spoiled, the new flour mixture wouldn't rise. If it was used when it had spoiled too much, it was poisonous. It seems in using leaven, timing is everything. And what we know about God's timing is that it is *always* perfect. So now what do we know about the kingdom of heaven?

What the Jews thought of as something evil and potentially poisonous, God uses for good. The kingdom of heaven explodes in the world and doubles or quadruples in size.

In the next two parables, Jesus tells us about the worth of the kingdom of heaven. Since we can't see it, it is sometimes hard for us to realize just how valuable it is. Jesus tells us that a man found a treasure in a field and in his joy, he went and sold everything he had so he could buy the field. He doesn't know whether there is more treasure in the field or not, but he is so overwhelmed but what he *has* found, that he's willing to give up all he has for what else he *might* find.

It seems we need to get only a glimpse of the Kingdom of God to know how valuable it is. Just because the Kingdom of God is hidden from us doesn't mean it's not there or that it's not worth our all.

Jesus goes on to tell us about the merchant who was searching for fine pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he sold all he had and bought it.

Perhaps even as we search for what is good and honorable and Godlike in *this* life, when we get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, we know that we have found something that far surpasses anything we have come across in this life and it is worth everything we have.

And the last parable is very similar to the one we heard last week about the wheat and the weeds growing side-by-side. When the net pulls in the fish, it pulls in both good and bad. Once on the shore, they are divided and the good are put into baskets and the bad are thrown away.

Good and bad swim side by side in the sea. In the end, God is the one who decides which is which.

Perhaps the Kingdom of God is where the righteous find refuge and safety in the basket.

All these allegories ... these metaphors ... these parables ... give us a little insight into the nature of the Kingdom of God. Things are not always as they appear. We see that God tends to use what we consider to be unusable. God values what we might see as trash ... people as well as things. God sees things differently than we do.

And apparently, the Kingdom of God is not particularly orderly either. It springs up where it will. It springs up unexpectedly. It will double in size. What starts out very small can become something huge. And its placement is completely random ... or so it would seem to us.

So, what's the point of continuing to do what we believe is right in the face of failure?

Here's the point: The small things matter. What we do in the name of Jesus Christ matters. It doesn't matter how big or small our effort. We aren't being required to do huge things. Even the little things ... most especially the little things ... matter. Nothing we do in the name of Jesus Christ is ever insignificant or wasted. In God's measure, it all counts. We have no idea how God might use our simple acts of kindness or gestures of love to spread the kingdom.

Do not lose heart and do not be afraid. God sees in us what others cannot see ... sometimes God sees in us what we cannot see in ourselves. God sees his treasure in each of us and sends us out into the world like so many tiny mustard seeds and beckons us to love randomly and with great abandon. God is transforming the world through us ... one person and one gesture at a time ... even though we may think that what we are doing doesn't really matter and that it won't make a difference. In God's hands, it makes all the difference in the world.

Do not be discouraged. Do not be disheartened. Do not let disappointment get the lion's share of your time and attention. The Kingdom of God is working in the world even though it may not appear that it is succeeding. In the world we live in, the good and the evil exist side-by-side. We need only to read the morning paper or see the evening news or catch the headlines in social media to know that to be true. The good and the evil are everywhere ... even in the church. But in the end, God will sort it all out. It's not our job to sort it out. It is our job to resist evil and respond to it with love. It is not our job to eradicate it. Our job is to share God's love with everyone we encounter.

The small things matter. Sometimes God's works are hidden and unacknowledged ... just like our good works are frequently overlooked. That doesn't mean they don't matter. And that

doesn't mean that God doesn't know about them or that God isn't using them ... and us ... to change the world.

And that's the whole point.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.