

Proper 12A
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52
The Reverend Bonnie Underwood
July 30, 2017

The Kingdom of God

We've been hearing lessons these two past weeks about seeds and sowing. Truth be told, I'm not a gardener. Plants and I don't do well together: I over-water or under-water or perhaps it's just the sound of my voice. My only hope of enjoying the beauty of God's creation in my own backyard is that Jess takes care of the plants. He, unlike me, is great at tending gardens.

So if any of you, like me, are "un-gardeners," rest easy. You don't need to know anything about tending plants properly, to get something out of today's gospel.

Why is Jesus sharing this story of the mustard seed? Or the parable of the yeast? Or finding the hidden treasure or priceless pearl? Or catching fish?

Jesus is trying to give us a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven — insight into the mysteries of concepts beyond our human comprehension. And a great way to help us open our minds and use our imagination, is through stories.

The kingdom of God is surprising. It can have very small and unexpected beginnings. A tiny round seed, the size of the very tip of a sharpened pencil, can be the beginning of unfathomable growth, exceeding our dreams and expectations. A small, seemingly insignificant speck, can produce a great yield. Or a baby born to poor parents and placed in a manger 2000 years ago, can impact the world for all time — for neither size nor worldly greatness, matters.

God's kingdom is like yeast. It can be virtually unseen, but is remarkably transformative and uplifting, causing changes, over time, that would never take place through the elements themselves. And Kingdom changes can begin humbly, with something as trivial and mundane as women's work in the ancient world, kneading yeast into dough or that unexpected phone call that cheers us, or the encouragement of a friend who inspires us, or the nudging of the Spirit guiding us to take the risk to try something new and make a difference. God's Kingdom is a place of hope and possibilities, where the Spirit enables us to do more that we can imagine.

God's kingdom is like a hidden treasure or a priceless pearl, things of great value which bring such joy, that you can't help but risk everything to obtain more. God's kingdom can change hearts. It has already changed the world, and Christ's work continues today through each of one of us.

What image, what story, stretches your imagination, magnifying your view into the kingdom of God?

I'd like to share one incident that struck me while I was in Honduras. Some of you have already heard this story.

I've been involved with LAMB Institute since 2005 when I first met Suzy McCall, a missionary from Charleston, who had begun a school to serve children in nursery through the early elementary grades in Flor del Campo, an impoverished barrio in Tegucigalpa. On my very first trip as we were working at the school, I witnessed young children literally being left at Suzy's

door by families who were unable to care for them. That humble start was the beginning of the Children's Home.

Julio was one of the early arrivals at LAMB. He was a beautiful child, with warm, brown eyes and a quick smile, who, even at 7, was lovingly protective of his siblings.

I caught sight of Julio that Sunday worship at the Children's Home. He's easy to spot, as the lead singer and keyboard player for the praise band, helping to lead worship. But my mind didn't just see the Julio of today, but a kaleidoscope of images: flashbacks back of a skinny, fragile-looking 7-year-old; a shy adolescent; a growing, somewhat awkward teenager; and now this confident young man — a sophomore at the university, studying to be an architect and the first of what we pray will be many young people from the children's home to receive advanced education.

So I was thrilled to hear that Julio would be spending some time with us at the guest house. He'd been working on a major project for his architecture class and been pulling all-nighters for a few days. Our guest house location would provide quiet time and space for those finishing touches, as well help to avoid the *cola*, the unpredictable traffic delays due to major road construction in the area.

That evening we invited Julio to join our devotional time, beginning with each of us sharing our "rose, bud, and thorn" of the day. A rose was that high point, something that showed us God's light in the world; a thorn, those prickly parts that stung us and hurt our hearts; and the buds: the hope and potential for things to come.

When it was my turn, I shared with Julio and the team that he was my rose and bud for that day. I had seen him grow from that scrawny boy — one who faced challenges that I would never experience and by all rational accounts would have virtually no hope for his future. Yet here he is today: a strong, self-assured young man; firm in his faith; knowing that God is with him in all that he does. Julio was a living sign of God's kingdom: a sign that working together, we can live into the possibilities of our better selves; that we can serve God by loving our neighbor and caring for others; and that small things, with God's help, can make a real difference. All is possible with God, and we can be confident in the future, for God is with us.

God empowers. God can grant us the patience and tolerance to be here in the present, can help us to move beyond our natural tendencies to ignore those who we perceive as different, our inclination to divide, label, and stereotype those on the outside as "other." God can help us move beyond those human places of conflict and divisiveness — politics, religion, gender, race, sexuality, sexual identity — into more positive and trusting relationships, for all are God's beloved children. With God's help, we can begin to realize that it's not up to us to force our ideas of rightness on one another or settle some score or judge, but instead to humbly trust our lives to God: kingdom living is about quiet acts of loving faithfulness.

Quiet acts of loving faithfulness.

For the kingdom of God is like a great net, one that gathers us all in. All are included, all are welcome. And even seemingly insignificant beginnings — like helping to support a small ministry in Honduras that provides a loving home to help a poor 7-year-old boy and his siblings in one of the poorest nations in the Americas — can, with God's help, bear amazing fruit, for God's kingdom is one of wondrous promise and unimaginable possibilities.

Yes, at the end of days, there will be judgment, but that is God's judgment, not ours. Are we ready to begin to let go of what separates us, and instead simply focus on spreading the Word -- the good news of the kingdom -- that treasure worth giving up everything else to get.

By sharing the old — the gospel — and linking it to the new — how we live and act in today's world — we can plant the seeds of Christ's love, forgiveness, and grace. For little things, even the almost invisible things, empowered by the Spirit, can make monumental differences in the world — like the smallest of all seeds, becoming the great tree where birds of the air come and make nests in its branches, for all is possible, with God.

What stories will you share of witnessing God's Kingdom in the world?

Amen.