

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

26 July 2020

1 Kings 3:5–12 | Psalm 119:129–136 | Romans 8:26–39 | Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

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Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² 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.”

³³ He told them 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.”

⁴⁴ “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.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore 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.” ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of God, the source of all help in times of trouble.

My name is Robert Smith. I am the Director of Briarwood Leadership Center, a ministry of the Northern Texas–Northern Louisiana Synod of the ELCA. It is a pleasure to be with you today, even in the midst of great challenges.

Not much appears to be going right these days ... the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, racism marches on, and our political leaders seem ineffective. All of us—as families and as communities—have been touched by the economic effects of this dysfunction. Some of us have lost loved ones. In the midst of it all, life goes on. All of the challenges we were facing in January are still with us, just more difficult.

The Kingdom of God sounds pretty good right now, doesn't it? Times like these, filled with loss and grief and disappointment, can make us yearn for a better place, where things are properly ordered, where all conflicts cease, and where, as the Book of Revelation (21.4) tells us, "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

Give us some good news, Jesus! Tell us all about the Kingdom of God!

It's like a mustard bush with birds inside. It's like yeast in dough, affecting everything. It's a buried treasure in a private field. It's a privately-owned pearl.

Umm, okay, Jesus. That wasn't the clearest answer. But thanks?

In a time when we're yearning for clarity, Jesus' parables on the Kingdom of God *might* not be the best place to start.

Jesus' parables are not clear. Not at all. They are like miniature poems, almost like haikus. They are gestures of communication, not systematic treatises.

We western Christians have been taught, often subconsciously, to take elements of our tradition that don't actually make logical sense and force them into a rational, sequential, scientific box. When we do that, we can find ourselves claiming that we know exactly, specifically, definitively and objectively what this or that saying from Jesus actually means.

But that's not the point of the parables. They are, by definition, parabolic. They don't move in straight lines or plot perfect circles.

Do you remember learning that the planets in our solar system don't orbit the Sun in perfect circles, but instead are each in their unique orbits with various distances and arcs? The parables are like that, but really are more like comets, entering from outside the system, slingshotting around the Sun, and speeding past us, off into the distance.

Jesus' parables don't exist to provide exact, scientific information about, in this case, the Kingdom of God. Instead, they attune us to mysteries of God that can be hinted at but never fully known. These parables passed onto us by Matthew tell us something—not about the exotic and beautiful ideas we might have about Heaven—but about ourselves.

Each of today's readings is about humility. Specifically, they are about intellectual and spiritual humility, knowing that there are things we can't master on our own.

Solomon asks for wisdom so he might govern effectively for the good of God's people. That takes humility, and God is moved.

Paul tells us in Romans that we don't even know how to pray as we should; you don't know what to ask for, so the Spirit prays on your behalf, beyond your understanding.

If we could actually see the Kingdom of God, we would know God's will, and the world would be properly ordered. But it's not. We are sinful. We miss the mark.

The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated our human frailty, our collective and individual weakness. In our present crisis, knowledge itself is being questioned, thrown into doubt.

The pandemic is bad enough. The arguments we're having amongst ourselves—motivated by political and financial gain—have made it exponentially worse. We are failing in our basic calling to serve our neighbor.

When Jesus shares parables about the Kingdom of God, he focuses, in part, on how we respond when we actually find it. When we find the pearl, we ... do everything to keep it for ourselves. We find the treasure buried in a field and we ... hoard it.

The situation is no different with Covid-19. Countries are spying on each other because *everybody* is convinced that whoever first develops an effective vaccine won't be willing to share it on a global scale. This is us. We humans are pretty special.

Can we find comfort and truth in a time like this? I am convinced that there is good news to be shared. In this time when it's difficult to know anything for certain, the church has a word to speak to the world.

Along with many of you, Briarwood Leadership Center is facing terrible challenges. The public health crisis has resulted in a financial crisis for our organization, one among thousands. Like your congregation, we have learned new ways of creating community, new ways of serving people throughout our synod. But we have been struck down. We have been forced to lay off several long-time employees, treasured members of the Briarwood family. Each loss leads to a sense of dread and grief.

In the midst of this, the Apostle Paul gives us challenging words of hope: "In all these things," he writes, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We are more than conquerors. You might not feel like it right now, but you are more than a conqueror. Not by our own power and might, but through the love of God in Christ Jesus.

When I was working on Middle East issues with the World Council of Churches, my efforts focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crises facing Christian communities in Iraq and Syria. My main contact in Geneva was a Lebanese Christian theologian named Michel.

Michel always signed off on his emails with the French phrase “Bon Courage.” The phrase generally means “hang in there!” But in the context of absolute crisis—when rival religious groups and militaries are threatening your community with genocide, being wiped off the face of the earth—the call to courage took on a new meaning.

It reminded me of Psalm 121, asking “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?”

We just learned that two Orthodox Christian archbishops were ambushed and kidnapped as they were traveling to a peace negotiation. They may be alive or dead. We met them a month ago. Please keep them in your prayers. Bon Courage.

We just learned that the Government of Israel is seeking to close off a valley near Bethlehem owned by the Catholic Church so a new illegal settlement can be built. What is our plan? Bon Courage.

Those types of situations, much like this present global pandemic, bring us face-to-face with our limitations and frailties. That can feel embarrassing, even humiliating. But there is a difference between humility and being humiliated.

Humiliation silences us. Only those who rely on their own strength alone can be humiliated—the bigger they are, the harder they fall. Humility, on the other hand, emboldens us to speak, owning our limitations and our weaknesses. Humility is the foundation of solidarity.

We are being humbled by this pandemic. Our weakness and pettiness are on full display. And that, dear friends, is exactly where the love of God meets us in Christ Jesus.

Even in “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword ... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” There is no doubt that we are being brought low. This is a terrible time in the life of the world and, especially, this country. It can be hard for us to see that we have the capacity to be “more than conquerors.”

This brings us back to our most basic proclamation: “God so loved the world that [God] gave [God’s] only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3.16–17).

Because God did not withhold even God's own child, as Paul proclaims, we are more than conquerors. This is not a false or delusional hope. It is a real hope, a manifestation of God's love. This moves us forward and strengthens the bonds of solidarity.

We sinful humans who would convince ourselves that good health and money are the surest signs of God's blessings, who would locate the Kingdom of God and then try to hoard it as private property, are reminded today that the Spirit prays on our behalf when we don't even know what we should pray and that nothing in the entire universe—not even ourselves—can separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, *you* are more than a conqueror. Amen.