



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MINISTER
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11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 18, 2006

Mark 4:26-32

Good Things

I was at a wonderful continuing education event this past week, I always enjoy those times of learning new things and engaging with questions you don't think about everyday. There was one question the leader asked that I'd like to share with everyone to consider; if someone came up to you and said "I want to become a Christian?" What would you do? What might you say? (I should add this was a group made up of entirely Lutheran pastors, I was the only Presbyterian.) As we pastors stumbled to respond, a point became clear.

One of the most difficult things about believing in God is trying to talk about it. If someone asks you why you believe, or how your life is different because you do believe, isn't it true there are no words that are true enough, right enough, or big enough to explain. We're asked and we rummage around for something to say, but everything sounds either too vague or too churchy. We could talk about how our heart feels full to bursting sometimes or about the mysterious sense of connection we feel with other human beings. We could talk about how

even the worst things that happen to us seem to have a blessing hidden in them somewhere, but the truth is that it is impossible to speak directly about holy things. How can the language of earth capture the reality of heaven? How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can human beings speak of God?

We don't do it well, that is for sure, but because we must somehow try, we tend to talk about what we cannot say in terms of what we can, that is, we tend to describe holy things by talking about ordinary things, and trusting that somehow we'll make connections. Believing in God is like coming home, we say, like being born again. It is like jumping off the high dive, like getting struck by lightning, like falling in love. We cannot say what it is, exactly, but we can say what it is like, and we hope that is enough to get the message across. If you still have your notes from high school English class, you can probably find the section on figures of speech, where this way of talking is called talking in

metaphors-talking about one thing by referring to another thing, getting at the meaning of one thing by comparing it to another. Sometimes the comparisons are comfortable and familiar. Her eyes were as blue as the sky, as blue as a robin's egg, as blue as the sea.

But other times the comparisons are jarring or startling. Her eyes were as blue as a bruise, as blue as ink spilled on a white page, as blue as a wave just before it breaks. When the comparisons catch us by surprise they make us stop, make us think. How can these two things be alike? What do they have in common? How deep does this connection go? When the comparisons catch us by surprise, our everyday understanding of things is broken open, and we are invited to explore them all over again, to go inside of them and see what is new.

Jesus did it all the time. Throughout the gospels, he was always making comparisons. Sinners are like lost sheep, the word of God is like seed sown on different kinds of ground, the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast, and God is like the owner of a vineyard. "The kingdom of heaven is like this..." he said over and over again, telling his followers stories about brides and grooms, sheep and shepherds, wheat and tares.

Have you ever wondered why he taught that way? Why didn't he just come right out and say what he meant? If anyone in the world were qualified to speak directly about God, surely it was Jesus, and yet he too spoke indirectly, making surprising comparisons

between holy things and ordinary things, breaking open our everyday understanding of things and inviting us to explore them all over again.

In other passages when asked what heaven is like, Jesus launches a volley of such comparisons. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, he says, then he'll say it is like yeast, like buried treasure, like a fine pearl, like a net cast into the sea. When Jesus teaches these images come quickly, one right after another, with no preparation, no explanation, no time for questions and answers. It is not like him to be in such a rush. He is usually a better storyteller than that, gathering his listeners around him and sliding into his tale with one of those time-honored introductions like, "There once was a landowner..." or "There once was a king..." When he does, his followers settle down to listen, knowing that the story will be full of meaning for them, knowing that they had better listen well.

This morning the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, nothing much to look at, not very impressive at all, at least not at first; but give them something to work on-sow the seed, and it can be astounding: a tree big enough for birds to nest in. If the kingdom of heaven is like that, then it is surprising, and potent, and more than meets the eye. There is an essential hiddenness-the mustard seed hidden in the ground. If the kingdom is like that, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface to be discovered and claimed.

So we might think, that if we are searching for the kingdom, we ought to start some place really holy, some place really extraordinary, like a medieval monastery, maybe, translating ancient texts with biblical scholars. Maybe we should begin in the Holy Land, or at the Vatican, or the National Cathedral. Then again it may not matter where we are, exactly, as long as we keep our eyes open for extraordinary clues wherever we are-looking out for heavenly visions, listening out for heavenly voices. Because if the kingdom of heaven is hidden in this world, it is hidden really well, and only the most dedicated detectives among us stand a chance of finding it at all.

Unless, of course, God has resorted to the oldest trick in the book and hidden it in plain view. There is always that possibility, you know-that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check but in the last place that any of us would think to look-namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives-like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless, like a diamond necklace on the dresser with the rhinestones-the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed in with the humdrum and ho-hum of our days, as easy to find as a child's smile when she awakes from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long drought- signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullest of our days. Jesus knew it all along. Why else would he talk about heaven in terms of farmers and fields and women baking bread and

merchants buying and selling things and fishermen sorting fish, unless he meant somehow to be telling us that the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things, that our treasure is buried not in some exotic far off place that requires a special map but that "X" marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary people and places and activities of our lives?

If we want to speak of heavenly things, he seems to say, we may begin by speaking about earthly things, and if we want to describe that which is beyond all words, we may begin with words we know, words such as: man, woman, field, seed, bird, air, yeast, bread; words such as: pearl, net, sea, fish, joy. The kingdom is like these things; the kingdom is found in these things. These are the places to dig for the kingdom of heaven; these are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having. Amen.