

Sermon – The Kingdom of God

Sunday, November 10, 2013

Scripture Readings – Romans 8:31-35, 37-39, Luke 13:18-21

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Our first reading, Romans 8, is perhaps one of the most important and powerful words of the Apostle Paul. Here Paul affirms the God is on humanity's side. Who is against us? Who will bring any charge against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Emphatically Paul says no one or nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Hear and believe the word of God. (Read Romans 8:31-35, 37-39.)

Our gospel reading, Luke 13:18-21 presents the teaching of Christ on the kingdom of God. Using parables, Christ reveals the mystery of God's presence in our midst, the small beginnings and hidden ways of God's kingdom transforming people's lives and communities of faith. Listen now for God's word. (*Read Luke 13:18-21.*)

The title of the sermon – “The Kingdom of God”

The Text: “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?” Luke 13:19a

Let us pray: Loving God, we thank you for the mystery of your kingdom in our midst and we pray that by your grace we may become a part of it. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The kingdom of God is like... *yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.* What is Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God in this parable?

Bread bakers understand that without the leaven, without the yeast, the bread does not rise. How the yeast makes the bread rise is a mystery and something that takes time. For Jesus—this ordinary, everyday event of rising bread sheds light on the beauty of God working in our lives. The grace of God within us is a gift and over time we are given the strength to rise to the occasions life presents. By the leaven, by the grace of God, we can live lives that are nourishing and sustaining within the kingdom of God.

A small amount of starter dough mixed with yeast is sometimes known as “the mother sponge.” It is not uncommon for a baker's starter dough to have years of history, from many hundreds of previous batches continuing the rich tradition of bread rising.

All of God's children need a little yeast to rise to the occasions life presents. In his parenting book entitled Giving Good Gifts, George Conway describes this yeast as the gift of *transcendent perspective*, which literally means to be able to look beyond what is in front of us...to be able to put present circumstances in the proper perspective and see things not only from our point of view, but from another's point of view and more importantly, from God's perspective! Giving our children this yeast in their lives doesn't mean we have all the answers, rather it means we guide and affirm them as we walk with them on their journeys.

And when those journeys present uninvited detours, complicated circumstances and loss, the yeast that is a part of our lives sustains us in mysterious and powerful ways. Joan Chittister, in her book The Story of Ruth, reminds us that during these times:

We learn, just when we think we have nothing, just when it feels that we have not one good thing left in the world, what we do still have is ourselves. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away, what can never be lost either to time or to chance: We have the self that brought us to this point. We have the grit, the hope; the calm; the bottomless, pulsating, irrepressible trust in the providence of God despite the turns of fortune...

The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took....

It is my husband Peter who bakes bread in our home. This past week I brought our starter “the mother sponge” from St. Louis to Springfield following an evening where Peter was honored with the Bob Harvey Lifetime Achievement Award from Independence Center after serving as their Board Chair and chair of their Capital Campaign. As I thought about the mystery of the kingdom of God in the *yeast that a woman took*, I thought of a woman in Peter’s family, Susan Hecker, who knew how to bake bread. A gracious hostess and devoted mother of three, her life was complete with raising her children and running an interior design needlepoint business.

Susan’s oldest daughter was attending the University of Michigan as a national merit scholar when their life changed unexpectedly. Darcy had a psychiatric break and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After a few years of seeking treatment and meeting other families that also sought care for their children who persevered with serious and persistent mental illness, Susan and her husband George, knew they had to rise to the occasion life had presented them. They worked to find a way for their daughter to live an independent life. They worked to find a community of support and encouragement and when they didn’t find one, they created one. The leaven in their lives was about to bring about something bigger than they would ever imagine possible.

In the late 1970’s, Susan traveled to the White House and participated in a conference on Mental Illness sponsored by first lady, Rosaline Carter. It was here that she learned about the club house model, which offers employment, affordable housing and a community of support, and met Bob Harvey who was on the staff of the first Club House in New York City, the Fountain House. Bob Harvey came to St. Louis and the Independence Center was founded.

Today, the Independence Center is a world premier Clubhouse, working in partnership with Barnes-Jewish Hospital serving hundreds of persons daily with severe and persistent mental illness, helping them to live independently and with dignity.

One gracious woman, who surely would have preferred another path in her life and the life of her daughter, did what she believed she had to do. Utilizing the resources that were hers, she rose to her life circumstance. What began as a small gesture of a determined and loving mother grew into a nurturing community for many of God’s children.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone sowed...it is the smallest of seeds, but when it is grown it becomes the greatest of trees so that the birds of the air come and make their nests in it.

In her book Scarred By Struggle; Transformed by Hope, Joan Chittister tells another story about the mystery of God's kingdom in our midst.

It's hard to imagine a bleaker place on earth than Bosnia in 1992. Ethnic tensions, centuries old, had flared again. Protestant Serbs, Orthodox Croats, and Sunni Muslims battled for national political control under the banner of religious freedom. The fighting was hand to hand, street to street, man to man.

Vedran Smailovic, the principal cellist of the prestigious Sarajavo Opera Theater described the city in those days as the capital of hell. The Opera Theater was destroyed, the economy was shattered and the very definition of human was in question.

On May 27, 1992 at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon a long line of starving, helpless people were shelled as they waited in front of the only bakery that still had enough flour to make bread. Twenty-two people died in the attack. Smailovic watched it happen from his apartment window.

The next day, as people lined up again for bread--certain they would die if they didn't come and well aware that they could die if they did-- Smailovic, dressed in a black suit and tie arrived carrying his cello and a chair. He sat down in the square and, surrounded by debris and despair, began to play Albinoni's mournful Adagio. And, whatever the continuing danger, he came back every day for twenty-one days. Over and over again, the Adagio sounded the memory that there are some things in the human spirit that simply cannot be suppressed. He refused to forget who he was and he chose to respond to hatred and cruelty with the leaven and seeds of faith and beauty. Today in the place where he sat is a monument of a man in a chair playing a cello. Since that time, Smailovic has been invited to play Adagio around the world.

This, my friends, is the story of the strength of the human spirit and this is the story of our faith as we break bread together in remembrance of the One who entered the depths of despair and rose again. May we recognize the mystery and wonder of the kingdom of God in our midst, and by the grace of God may we become a part of it. Amen.