



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So was anyone else kind of smiling a little bit at the end of that gospel when Jesus, having fired off no less than five or six parables in rapid fire with no explanation, turns to the disciples and says, okay, do y'all get that? Understood? Everybody good? And they're like, yes, crystal clear. It's kind of a funny exchange when you think about it. For one, the disciples, they're not really portrayed in the Gospels as being the sharpest tools in the shed, but also because parables really weren't intended to be understood, per se.

The purpose of a parable isn't to provide information, but to provoke our imagination, to expand our thinking. They're a bit like those old Twilight Zone episodes, or an M. Night Shyamalan movie, where a twist ending suddenly changes everything we thought we just had been following in the story. Leaving us a little disgruntled, sometimes unsatisfied, but always pondering bigger ideas and leaving us to debate deeper truths.

So on the chance you didn't digest these as easily as our disciples, let us take a closer look, at least at the first four. To start, they're each describing the kingdom of Heaven. So it might be a helpful reminder to ourselves that when Jesus says the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of God or the reign of God, He's not talking about the afterlife. He's talking about this life. He's describing what this world looks like when God's ways become our ways, when God's priorities become our priorities, when God's justice, our justice. That's the world we seek to build. It's the world we pray for in the Lord's Prayer when we say, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Christianity, in other words, is not our escape plan to the next world. It's God's restoration plan for this one. And as Christ's body, our calling as Christians is to participate in that restoration. Not to wait for it, not to merely pray for it, but to roll up our sleeves and join with it. To partner with God's redemptive work that is already happening all around us.

And so Jesus offers these parables to open our eyes, to open our imaginations so we might see what this redemption looks like. So that we might recognize it when it's happening right under our nose and see the opportunities to join in. The kingdom of Heaven, we are told, is like a tiny mustard seed that sprouts. Not into some majestic and noble cedar tree, but into a notoriously invasive weed. Creeping and crawling through the underbrush, hated by farmers because once

established, mustard plants can take over entire fields. They irritate the livestock. They get into their eyes. And they disrupt our carefully sown crops.

Describing God's kingdom as a mustard seed to an ancient agrarian culture? It's like telling me, who spends way too much time and money trying to perfectly manicure his lawn, edging, weeding, watering. It's like saying to me, the kingdom of God is like that Bermuda grass that is driving you crazy. That no matter what you do, you can't seem to stamp it out. You can't seem to root it out. You can't seem to tear it out. It always comes back and it even gets bigger, it seems. In other words, God's ordering of the world is so different from ours that we might even mistake it for something akin to a weed. A nuisance whose only purpose seems to interrupt and disrupt our comfortable, well manicured lives.

Ah, but there's another twist. This persistent, irritating weed will grow and expand and eventually become a place of refuge and rest. Where new life can nest and grow. Changing not only the landscape, but our entire perception of it. It makes me wonder, perhaps the kingdom of God is like a seamstress at a department store riding the bus home after a long day of work, when suddenly she's told she would need to give up her seat for a white person, to which she responds, no.

And from that tiny seed, a simple two letter word. In spite of all their efforts to uproot her, despite all their efforts to arrest her, would spread and become a boycott, which would contribute to a national movement that would not only disrupt the well ordered system of segregation, but change how we perceive one another and history along with it.

The kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, which without any effort on our part, hidden from our sight, in a process that might as well be magic to most of us, can leaven three measures of flour. Ah, but it turns out that three measures of flour in the ancient world is a lot of flour. According to our New Testament scholar and friend, AJ Levine, it would make some 60 pounds of dough. Claire Cable at the 8 o'clock almost fell out of her chair when I said that. That's enough to make something like 60 or more loaves of bread. Suddenly this story of a woman quietly baking bread in her kitchen becomes an image of God's extravagant hospitality and wild abundance.

And I find that notion comforting because I often feel as if I'm not doing enough to serve others. That I miss opportunities to go that extra mile. I feel guilty sometimes that I should somehow be doing more. These parables remind me that while that may be true sometimes, it is also true that it is not all about me. I don't have to be the hero. I don't have to do it all. God doesn't need my grandiosity, nor my need to be recognized. The Holy Spirit has a way of taking that small gift, my sometimes unseen, anonymous act of compassion, and doing more with it than I could ever dream.

Here at the church, we are in the midst of a shoe drive, as Father Bill mentioned. And while buying a pair of shoes for a child in need, while that might seem like a small thing, think back to when you were a child, a little boy or a little girl, getting ready for school that first day. Can you remember what that was like, not knowing who would be in your class? Would you make new friends? Would anybody sit with you? Would you get picked on because of what you were wearing?

I came across the story of a teacher in California who noticed that one of her third graders was really struggling. So she made a point to keep an eye on him and soon noticed that he was wearing shoes that were easily two sizes too big. His mom couldn't afford new ones and so he was wearing his brother's hand-me-downs. And during recess, the teacher noticed he would have trouble running and playing kickball because the shoes would literally slip right off his feet. And then other kids would laugh at him and point fingers at him. And eventually, he took to sitting on the sidelines, watching instead of playing.

She also saw how it affected his mood in school. He sometimes got left out of group activities in class and sometimes sat alone at lunch. So she took it upon herself to buy him a new pair of shoes. She hid them in his locker. Put a note on there so he knew that they were for him. And from the moment he put them on, his face lit up. His smile returned. He had a whole new sense of confidence. He showed them off to all the kids in class. And he started to play again. It was like he was a whole new person. Not just on the playground, but in the classroom.

Does that still sound like such a small act, such a small gift? And do you think the Holy Spirit was done with it there? The potential ripples of that small act of compassion, that small trajectory change for that little boy, it strikes me as potentially limitless, as eternal, as Jesus would say.

The next two parables about selling everything in order to obtain a greater treasure, they remind me of the story of the rich young man. Do you remember that one? That's the one about the wealthy man who comes to Jesus, seeking the kingdom of God, and Jesus says, sure, I just need you to do three things: sell all your possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow me. And do you remember his response? He walks away. He walks away because his possessions, it turns out, actually owned him.

The parables of the treasure seeker and the pearl merchant, they tell us the story of what it looks like when we say yes. And don't get caught up in that all or nothing language. Don't let that turn you off. Giving up our old life, letting go of our old ways to follow Jesus, it is the goal. But it's also a lifelong process. One that never ends. One that's never complete. No matter how old we get, no matter what stage of life we may be in.

Yes, the inspiration can feel like a lightning bolt sometimes, a sudden revelation. But how it plays out is often far more gradual. Giving up something here, letting go of something there, letting go of a distraction over there, putting a little more of our trust in God each time, and then in the process, slowly freeing us to take one more step forward toward the kingdom of God.

No, what really strikes me about both of these stories. is how neither character shows even a hint of remorse. Did you notice that? There's no begrudging, there's no guilt, no indication of some big sacrifice. In fact, they don't even hesitate. Having glimpsed the kingdom of God, they jump on it. They give up their life, not out of obligation, we are told, but out of joy.

It reminds me, years ago, when I was invited to join the staff of the cathedral, and I was pondering what it might be like for my life to give up my law practice and go to work for the church. So I went and talked to our canon liturgist. He had done just that a few years prior. He had left a career as a financial executive with expense accounts and a company car, and now lived in a small studio apartment, drove a used car, and made his lunch every day.

So I asked him, you know, Brooks, did you miss your old life? Was it hard to give that all up? And he said to me, without any hesitation, not for a second. Chris, I feel free. In fact, when I come in each day, I don't even feel like I'm at work. His life had come into such alignment. His passion for worship, his desire to serve, so perfectly overlapped in his life that any notion of sacrifice didn't even enter into it. What others saw as giving something up, he experienced as life giving. The burden had become easy. His yoke was now light.

Perhaps you know of someone who's changed their path to follow more closely whatever call that God has placed on their life, on their heart. Chas Kipp and his wife Kristen, who we will be celebrating later today, have been packing up their house this very week as they prepare to do just that. Perhaps you too have had moments in your life where it feels out of alignment with what God has placed on your heart. Is the Holy Spirit nudging you in a new direction? Is the Holy Spirit persistently inviting you to disrupt your well ordered life in some way, big or small?

Like the disciples in our gospel today, it is probably fair to say that none of us ever fully understand how the kingdom works. What it all means, what we should do, and how it will all play out. We talk about hearing and listening for the Holy Spirit, and following the Holy Spirit's call in our life, and we pray about it, but it's not always clear. The path is rarely certain. Sometimes, the best way to hear the Spirit is to experiment. Try it on. See if it bears fruit in your life and in the life of others around you.

Perhaps that is what the disciples are saying yes to today. Not to fully understanding how it all works, but yes to the promise of God. Yes, to the promise that Paul reminds us of in his letter to the Romans. That God is for us. That no matter the path we take, no matter the path we fail to take, no matter the mistakes we make or the crazy things we try, may we do so without fear. Because nothing we do and nothing we fail to do. can ever separate us from the love of God.

Amen.