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Proper A-12, Track 2
Discerning the Kingdom
I Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-34, Matt 13:31-33, 44-52

For the last few weeks, we have been listening to a series of parables that begin with the phrase: ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is like...’ This section of Matthew’s gospel is thick with metaphors of growth: The sower, the seed, the wheat and the tares – and as this chapter comes to a close today, Matthew seems to be in a rush to get in a few more. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a fine pearl, a net full of fish. Of these last five metaphors, FOUR of them have to do with taking a risk, and becoming ACTIVE in growing the Kingdom. This final rush of parables seems to be saying: give your all, risk whatever you have to for grace! They all show that grace is something unexpected, potent, and irresistible. When we’ve found “IT” what other choices do we really have? What other path is there?

But life is not that simple. Choosing the right action often takes discernment. What is your unexpected, abundant mustard seed? What IS the yeast in your plans? Would we know a hidden treasure, or pearl of great price, when we see one? All of these metaphors throw us into the arms of God, praying for the direction of the Holy Spirit. We see this plea in one way or another in today’s scriptures, beginning with Solomon’s famous prayer for wisdom.

While today’s gospel frames life’s vital choices in terms of risk-taking, Paul’s letter to the Romans expresses what is going on inside of us, when faced with moments of decision. Usually, these are intense moments. We are not talking about small decisions here. We are talking about the kind of decisions that bring vitality, creativity and direction to our lives. Decisions that usually have to be made in the face of struggle or suffering. Moments when we come face to face with our weaknesses, not just our strengths.

Now Paul knows that these Roman Christians have experience with such moments; and that they will have more. He tells them: “*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*” Paul is saying that in the midst of our crises, the Spirit is bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven, whether we understand it or not.

This is a very strange kind of discernment. It is rooted not in understanding as WE know it. But it is a wisdom rooted in LOVE as we CAN know it; the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul suggests that when life gets tough, we don’t have to understand it, we don’t even have to know what to pray, but we CAN TRUST that good will come out of God’s love and purpose. Love and purpose can root a life. They can give shape to discernment, life to decisions, and wisdom to actions. Of course there is always the danger that we might take love and purpose in the wrong direction, a direction that leads from confidence to arrogance. And there is plenty of that around us. In the face of such self-assuredness, Paul says that we can be “conformed to the image of his Son.” What is it to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, to be like Jesus? The description we get is this: we have the power to show God’s generosity; a generosity that does not hold back, that considers the good of those around us. It seeks the well-being of others before ourselves. It prays for the world we live in, the history we breathe, the creatures with whom we share this earth.

Now that is a lot to ask! But Paul knew we can only sustain this if we live in the present, depending upon the power of the Spirit. We often do NOT know or understand the outcome of our decisions until much later, but we CAN know and depend upon the love of Christ and the power of the Spirit to get us through right now. I don’t need to stand here and tell you that the struggles of life are real, whether they are physical, emotional or spiritual. But there is a certain perspective that will get us through: the perspective of PRAYER. We cannot see the future, but we CAN know the power of

God in the present. We CAN sense the edge between our struggles, and God's providence. It is at THAT EDGE, that place where we DON'T understand, where the world is NOT making sense, that Paul says the Spirit takes over for us. It is at that point in prayer, where we no longer know WHAT to say, the point at which our understanding fails, that the Spirit begins its wonderful work. WE may not see it or sense it, but the generosity and love that worked in the life of Jesus is at work in us AT THAT POINT. But here is the key: we have to be willing to consent to the Spirit to do so. The Spirit is calling us to intercede for the world just as it called Jesus. This is where we most KEENLY FEEL our own limits, our futility and longings - it is in our broken-hearted SIGHS for a new and better world, that this divine work begins.

This is risky business; a pearl of great price. We WANT to know, we WANT to see where God is at work. But often we DO NOT get to see it. There is a wonderful little story, told by the 19th century Polish rabbi and mystic, Menahem Mendel. It goes like this:

A man once wandered from city to city and came upon a palace that was engulfed in flames. Since no one seemed to be present and trying to put out the fire he wondered to himself: 'Could it be that this palace has no lord?' But suddenly a figure, whom he could BARELY DISCERN through the smoke, looked down on him from one of the windows and said, 'I am the lord of this palace.'

This little story captures God's relationship to our world. When we look around, we see our world, our palace, IS in flames. God seems absent. But actually God is the lord of this palace, our world, **suffering inside of it with us**. We may not see that this place, this life of ours, HAS a master, but it is our LIFE's WORK to LOOK for him despite the smoke we see. We MUST give voice to the yearnings in our hearts even when we don't have the WORDS for them, because THAT is when the Spirit is most at work. This was Paul's message to the Romans. We are NOT meant to acquiesce to suffering and ugliness. We are meant to live, passionately amid our struggles, to create

a NEW REALITY. We need to commit to the solution BEFORE we know what it is. We need to commit to the Kingdom BEFORE we see it. And the only way for us to wrest goodness out of this situation is to know the LOVE of God for which we were created, before we ever knew ourselves, and BEFORE we imagined a better future. THIS is the knowledge, THIS IS THE MUSTARD SEED, that precedes the Kingdom. The stakes are high, and the struggles are real. Our HOUSE IS ON FIRE. But the Spirit is at work in us. It is the same Spirit that gave the world Christ, and the same Spirit that moved Jesus to give himself for the life of the world. NOTHING can separate us from THAT Spirit and THAT Love. THAT is a pearl of great price, a hidden treasure. LOOK FOR IT!

References

N.T. Wright. *NIB Volume X*. Pp 410-619.

N.E. Goldstein. *God at the Edge*. Pp. 131-134.