

July 30, 2017 Romans 8: 26-39, Psalm 105 Part One VU 828, Mt 13: 31-33, 44-52

SPE with MacKay United

Practice in Seeing God's Miraculous Work

God is at work, even though human eyes may fail to perceive what is happening. These parables teach us that the Kingdom of Heaven, or the kingdom of God is not what you think it is. These parables of Jesus as found here in Matthew's gospel show how a faith that is found and put into action grows exponentially, maybe even fantastically.

He begins by speaking of the mustard seed, that tiniest of seeds that those of you who do some pickling know how small it is. Imagine for a moment those new weeds that have shown up and are taking over along our fields and roadways – wild parsnip or purple loosestrife and I think that is how this we might imagine the growth of this tiny mustard seed. It's hard to imagine as well that a farmer or a gardener would actually sow this kind of seed in the middle of their field. Yet here it is, this image of how God acts in the world. Even the expectation that this would be normal sized plant is challenged for this plant grow into a tree which provides a home for all kinds of birds, for blue jays, cardinals and chickadees. Those of you who spend your summers watching who comes to your bird feeders, including those pesky squirrels and chipmunks, would be delighted by this image of God's activity in our world.

Imagine that is what your life of faith is becoming. You plant small seeds of hope here and there, in your family, your church, your neighbourhood, maybe not expecting too much to change or happen, but then you will be amazed at what grows out of your small idea, your dream, the risk that you will take to run with it.

I used this text to preach at the 125 anniversary service of St Andrew's UC in Beachburg in the Ottawa Valley this year and because many Ottawa city dwellers enjoy a joyride on the Ottawa River with one of the rafting companies, you may not appreciate

the background of how those adventure companies came to be. I can imagine those who once farmed or logged along the Ottawa River where the river runs fast and furious and who sold that land to some entrepreneurial people would be amazed at how the Whitewater industry flourished over the years let alone the Algonquin people who trekked beside those waters in their trade journeys.

Because of the deep respect and fear they had for the power of those rapids, they had always stayed as far away as possible knowing lives had been lost. But now that those businesses have been established for decades, those original land owners can see how many young people were able to attend college and university from the summer jobs provided there and how it provides seasonal employment. It has not only spawned a tourist industry but an educational venture as well as Algonquin College has created a program focusing on the Whitewater industry which attracts people from around the world to its Pembroke/ Ottawa River campus.

I know that there are countless ideas that were sparked by desire to care for your neighbour that developed into activities for the children and youth, for programs and new partnerships. I understand that you folks at MacKay are undertaking a program to have 'Conversations that Matter' in your community in New Edinburg and hopefully this planting of seeds will grow and surprise you as you trust that God's Spirit is working within this endeavour. Maybe we too could be included in this conversation.

Another example Jesus gives for imagining the action of God in the world, is of the woman who takes the small particle of yeast and mixes it with flour. But it's not just a small batch of flour, it's 3 measures of flour, about 50 pounds, enough for 100 loaves of bread – that would make a whole lot of bread, enough for a dozen feasts. You can almost hear that magnificent loaf of bread rising, smelling that bread as it is rising, salivating with anticipation to taste the flavours as it cooks in the oven, filling the air with it's goodness and blessing. It's so much better than taking a trip to a crowded Costco store.

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says. There is a feeling of joy that touches all of our senses, a sense of surprise and anticipation for the anticipated feasting and nourishment.

This image inspired the poet All Renee Boazarth to write this prayer back in 1978 which was well known in women's circles. It was a very meaningful prayer for me in those years when I was becoming more immersed in the life of the church, when I was trying to live a simpler lifestyle which included baking bread. This poem also helped to expand the image of God for me and for women in the church that was searching for new language for how we experience God's action in our spiritual lives:

Bakerwoman God

Bakerwoman God,
I am your living bread.
Strong, brown Bakerwoman God,
I am your low, soft, and being-shaped loaf.

I am your rising bread,
well-kneaded by some divine
and knotty pair of knuckles,
by your warm earth hands.
I am bread well-kneaded.

Put me in fire, Bakerwoman God,
put me in your own bright fire.
I am warm, warm as you from fire.
I am white and gold, soft and hard,
brown and round.
I am so warm from fire.

Break me, Bakerwoman God.
I am broken under your caring Word.
Drop me in your special juice in pieces.
Drop me in your blood.
Drunken me in the great red flood.

Self-giving chalice swallow me.
 My skin shines in the divine wine.
 My face is cup-covered and I drown.

I fall up
 in a red pool
 in a gold world
 where your warm
 sunskin hand
 in there to catch
 and hold me.
 Bakerwoman God,
 remake me.

When is it that you have felt like this? If you are a bread maker you may experience this all this time. Rev John Moor who attends our church here has made it his ministry to bake the bread himself every time we celebrate Holy Communion. Yet even on the Sunday when the bread did not rise as he expected, there was still a sense of joy as we shared in the simple meal of bread and wine. As we break bread together the Spirit of Christ infuses our gatherings and brings us joy as yeast rising in the dough.

These parables that Jesus shares of course are metaphors, illustrations that open us to reflect upon and to experience the presence of God's grace within our own hearts and lives, to claim this eternal love which sustains, heals and strengthens us from one generation to the next.

So how are we to respond to the ever-present, expansive and overflowing joy and life that is always present to us?

Hear again how Jesus himself offers some stories of how people might respond to this heavenly presence. He says it is like a 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. Or again, it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all the he had and bought it.

Most of you who are sensible, practical people would find these to be crazy stories – who would do these things, selling everything off everything in a field to buy one little treasure – wow that must be some treasure! Or why would someone who already owned many pearls and gems sell everything to buy one tiny little pearl! It must be worth a fortune. Who would do such a thing and why? These are certainly not business practices that would give you a spot on the Dragon’s Den!

It’s all about finding joy, searching for it, letting go of what gets in the way or distracts us and claiming those things, those practices that give us joy. What is it that gives you joy? Some of you may be familiar with the writer Marie Kondo who has made a whole business of helping people downsize, to eliminate all those things that we unnecessarily hold onto, that we may hoard from one generation to the next, things that no longer give us life, that no longer give us joy. The book is called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* by Marie Kondo. Her strategy for letting go is this: *Discard everything that does not “spark joy,” after thanking the objects that are getting the heave-ho for their service.*

It seems to me that every generation of Christians have searched for what gives them joy, what gives their life and their communities’ life meaning, how our understanding of God and the scriptures that we have been given can be interpreted and expressed in such a way that they continue to give us joy, a taste of heaven. And of course, as Jesus tries to teach his disciples, it is in the searching, in the sharing with God, with one another our questions and our affirmations about a joy filled life, that indeed the Holy Spirit becomes present among us. The Spirit is always searching for us, seeking to animate and renew our lives.

We have been constantly on that path of discovering and witnessing to a joyful faith from our beginnings when those first disciples were astounded by an empty tomb and wondered what that meant, who prayed behind locked doors afraid of the future

when Jesus revealed himself to them, to those people in our neighbourhoods who decided to build their churches where they lived and worked, to those who people who believed that being a church united was the answer to remaining vital. There have been people of faith who were continually searching for new songs to sing, new words and images to express our shared faith, new ways to share in the sacraments of life.

Our churches have always been very good at honouring the past, knowing who and what stories are the treasures of a faith to hold on to. Most of our churches (if not all) are not so good at letting go of those things that no longer bring joy, that no longer have meaning for the people of the current day, that have become burdensome.

We are now at a significant crossroad in the life of our denomination as our Canadian society changes, as we feel the impact of changes globally. As you know we are in the midst of making significant decisions nationally of how we will organize ourselves, how we will train and shape our future leaders called to serve in ministry and what those ministry streams will even look like. The votes across Canada have been cast and the majority of presbyteries and congregations have voted for change, for organizing ourselves in more efficient ways, for letting go. There is no doubt it is a time of great anxiety of many fronts, but we know that we have lived through many changes already, including political and social turmoil .

The kingdom of heaven is still real, although hidden, still unfolding, animating, encouraging and sustaining your lives and the life of this faith community here at SPE, at MacKay United Church, across our church and especially within this marvelous creation that never ceases to surprise and amaze us. Even those noxious weeds like wild parsnip (as long as you don't touch them) are worthy objects for our spiritual nourishment.

Jesus' offers a wonderful freeing image to help us sail into the future with courage and a willingness to take risks on this adventure of faith, to respond joyfully with our

lives – that of the net that is flung into the sea which catches fish of every kind. So go from this place encouraged to go fishing, to plant your gardens, to bake your bread, invest in business for the Spirit is very much alive, sowing and rising in our hearts.

Prayer:

May joy and faith abound in this place, in this time O gracious God of abundant grace. Spirit of life, rise within our hearts and minds like enlivening yeast, surprising us over and over again that this life of faith can nourish us and help us to thrive on this journey of life, through death and into life beyond death. We are not alone O God; your storied presence still lives within and around us. In Jesus name, the great storyteller, we offer this prayer. Amen