



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 12 (A)

Finding Value in What Others Overlook

[RCL] Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

In the Finger Lakes region of central New York, you can find a delicious and unique treat: concord grape pie. Like many other places in the United States, there are a variety of bakeries and shops in the small towns nestled among the winding roads. They sell all sorts of pies, but grape pie is a specialty. It makes sense, especially given all the vineyards in the Finger Lakes region. So why not make wine and pie?

Vineyards are everywhere. Rows and rows of grape vines next to rows and rows of corn and other crops. So neat and orderly looking – quite pretty. Quite predictable, except for the weeds, of course. You never know where or when they’re going to show up. Just like we can never predict how the Kingdom of God will show up.

Take, for example, the parable of the mustard seed that Jesus tells in today’s gospel. What we may not know today, but what the early listeners would have most likely understood, is that the mustard plant is a weed that grows like a bush and spreads. It’s a very invasive weed. Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a plant that will constantly and inevitably keep growing and spreading. Have you ever seen ivy on an old house, taking it over completely? Now there’s a visual. That’s what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

But that’s the endgame. Jesus’ point is that the beginnings of the Kingdom are tiny. The Kingdom of God starts small and unnoticeable. But when the Kingdom comes into its own, it is everywhere, and you can’t miss it. We are part of that growth, part of that kingdom, whether anyone recognizes us for what we are or not. The most important thing is that God knows.

Jesus does not stop there in our gospel lesson today. He gives even more parables – more stories of ordinary things that possibly have extraordinary meanings. Parables like these should be wrestled with.

In his book “The Parables of the Kingdom,” C.H. Dodd wrote: “At its simplest, a parable is a metaphor or simile, drawn from nature or the common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

So, what else do our parables tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? It says in the gospel that it is like yeast that a woman mixes with flour to make huge amounts of dough – enough for an entire wedding feast. In Jesus' time, leavening was something that people understood in scripture as unclean or evil. Unlike the convenient packets of dried yeast we have today, leavening was done by letting some bread rot just enough in order to leaven a new batch of ingredients. The Kingdom of Heaven is being modeled after something that is seen as unwanted or unusable in everyday life. And yet, God makes it good.

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a treasure hidden in a field that makes a person sell all they have in order to buy the field that the treasure is in. It is like a pearl of great price that makes the merchant sell all he had in order to have just that one pearl. How valuable is the Kingdom of Heaven? What would you give up everything to possess? Would possession be worth the sacrifice?

The Kingdom of Heaven in your part of God's vineyard is like You fill in the blank.

What is valuable in God's Kingdom, others may see as junk. How often do we buy into the attitude that on Sundays we carry Jesus in our pocket and take him out for a while, only to put him back in as soon as we leave the parking lot? We get settled in our daily lives the rest of the week and forget whom it is we follow. We might think, "Oh I'm just part of a little church. We can't do much, so why bother?"

As Lou F. McNeil in his essay on Christianity in Appalachia puts it, "When one's thinking begins with the parish and its members, rather than the gospel itself, it is likely that ministry and planning will not get beyond the parish and its membership."

Why bother indeed? Except that God bothers. Then God asks us to bother more than we want.

Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom starts out small like a mustard seed and grows into a tree that shelters and nurtures life around it. When that small mustard seed starts growing, it has an advantage, because it can grow in and around the landscape, sheltering those beneath it and giving a place to perch for those above it. This, too, is how the gospel is spread in neighborhoods where churches discern which leaf to unfurl in their present landscape. A little branch here, a little branch there, and suddenly the place is alive with people in the neighborhood being nurtured by the spread of the gospel.

God's gifts are unexpected, but they are so vast that they require a response. Do we give up our self-centered attitudes and everything else for the Good News of the gospel? That's a question that will take a lifetime to answer and is easier said than done.

Sometimes we don't know what to do with the section of God's Kingdom that we've been given. Even right now, we are in flux – we don't know what the future holds for the church. But even in that unknowing, we have an advocate – the Holy Spirit – that helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. As Paul says in today's reading from his letter to the Romans, "We know

that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” It might not look like what we think it should look like, but God knows better.

We must trust God. The God that uses what others think is unusable. The God that calls us to love others with reckless abandon. The God that sees in us what others cannot see. By living this way, we become of what the Kingdom of Heaven is made.

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