



Sunday Devotion

July 26, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself or with another and come to God.

HYMN SING

#300 We Are One in the Spirit

1. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;
we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:

3. We will work with each other; we will work side by side
we will work with each other; we will work side by side,
and we'll guard human dignity and save human pride:

Refrain: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

#307 God of Grace and God of Glory

1. God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy power;
crown thine ancient church's story
bring its bud to glorious flower
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

4. Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore.
Let the gift of thy salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving thee whom we adore,
serving thee whom we adore.

CALL TO WORSHIP

What mysteries there are in God's world!

We, so sophisticated, stand in awe at the wonders of the natural world.

We look at the tiniest of seeds and wonder what will happen

From that small seed will grow a large shrub.

Although we consider our gifts to be small and insignificant,

God will use our gifts in miraculous ways.

Praise the God of small seeds and mighty power. Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord of mustard seeds and yeast, we come to you this day, seeking your Word and will for us. Make us people who care deeply about the well-being of others. Give us courage to be yeast for the rising of hope and peace throughout the world. Open our hearts to your redeeming love, for we ask this in Christ's Name. Amen.

HYMN #833 O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go

1. O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee,
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer fuller be.

2. O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,

3. O Joy that sleekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.

4. O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,

that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

and from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

CALL TO CONFESSION

When we don't know how or what to pray, the Spirit knows. When all we can muster are sighs and groans, the Spirit knows those also. When we feel that we aren't even worthy to approach God, the Spirit goes before us and with us and God welcomes us with arms open.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS

Sneaky God, we confess that we aren't paying attention. We fail to see that you are at work in the world around us. We fail to see the treasures you have hidden for us: the joy found in sunrises and sunsets, the breathtaking rainbow after the storm, the comet in the night sky. There are secrets we don't understand until we experience them: the love you plant between two people, the laughter of children, the tears that bring relief. We often aren't paying attention to how you are at work in the world around us. Open us up to the hidden treasures, the secret delights of life, O God, and help us to live into your wisdom and insight, with the Spirit's leading. In the name of Jesus Christ, who showed us the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF BLESSING/FORGIVENESS

Here is some wonderful news! While we were worrying and fretting, God has been at work in our lives offering healing and peace. Receive these gifts in the name and love of the Lord our God. Remember that Jesus died for you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus loves you. Jesus is good to you. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Romans 8:26-39

²⁶ Likewise 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. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

³¹ He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like 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.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

SERMON

Just the other day I was having a conversation with my granddaughter, Charlotte. She asked me the question, “Grandma, do you think we get to eat in heaven?” Now this is a perfectly reasonable question due to the fact that food in her family is very important. Wonder where that comes from? Her mom, my daughter, Sarah, worked for many years in a restaurant as a sous-chef and pastry chef assistant. Although this is no longer her chosen career, she enjoys cooking and the creativity of cooking so much that she has started a once-a-month online cooking class. Charlotte is her assistant. Charlotte has even held her own online cooking class and often takes over the cooking of dinner. Charlotte is eight.

Since cooking plays a central role in her life, it is understandable that she might wonder if such an enjoyable thing in this world will be available in that which is yet to come. So I answered her inquiry by stating that Jesus never talks about the specifics of heaven, descriptions of heaven in the Bible tell us that is working out a place that is even better than what we know now. In my mind, that has to include food. Since my teenage years I have held the belief that there has got to be popcorn in God’s heavenly Kingdom, or at least I’m hoping that is true.

So what do you think heaven is like? Several years ago, Starbucks Coffee launched a campaign called “The Way I See It.” Various quotes from different sources were printed on the coffee cups. Professor of Preaching, Karoline Lewis, remembered quote #230 that was authored by *LA Times* columnist, Joel Stein. He said, “Heaven is totally overrated. It seems boring. Clouds, listening to people play the harp. It should be somewhere you can’t wait to go, like a luxury hotel. Maybe blue skies and soft music were enough to keep people in line in the 17th century, but Heaven has to step it up a bit. They’re basically getting by because they only have to be better than Hell.”

How we imagine what the Kingdom of heaven is like depends a lot on what we need the Kingdom of heaven to be, which frequently hinges on factors we’d rather ignore. Our penchant for certain visualizations of the Kingdom of heaven have less to do with what the Bible says and more about what’s at stake for us. Our language about the Kingdom of heaven tends to be attached to how we think God should act and not how God has already acted. Our assumptions rely heavily on our system of rewards and not on God’s choice to bless.

So I ask again, what do you image the Kingdom of heaven to be like? Is it streets lined with gold? A heated swimming pool with endless glasses of cool lemonade or Long Island iced tea for all the “good” people? Is it filled with all the people you long to see and none of the people you don’t?

In the two parables we read today, Jesus gives us a glimpse of heaven but it isn’t that final destination we all long for. The Kingdom of heaven Jesus describes is the Kingdom we don’t have to wait for because God is already making it happen here and now. It’s present. It’s been planted and already growing because the Kingdom of heaven is where God is even now. As Paul says in the book of Romans, “nothing can separate us from God’s love.” This Kingdom of heaven we don’t have to wait for or wonder what food will be served. Jesus describes this Kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed.

Remember, in these little word pictures Jesus set out to do three things: 1) tease the imagination; 2) challenge accepted values; and 3) make a larger point.

Every Jew would know that the Kingdom of heaven was something great. It represented the grandest, the most magnificent of all realities—whether it was to be established by military means in the overthrow of the Romans, or by the direct in breaking of the Divine Rule. Either way, it was a Hebrew's ultimate concern. So how does Jesus go about describing this reality of Realities? He starts out by likening the Kingdom to a *weed* in a field. Who in their right mind is going to actually plant a *weed* in a field?

If you've spent any significant time in the Southeastern United States, you know that "Kudzu" is bad word. A very bad word. People in that part of the country hate Kudzu with a passion. The reason is that it is one of the fastest growing invasive plants ever to make it to our shores. Ironically, Kudzu was originally cultivated in the U. S. about a hundred years ago as a means of controlling erosion. But talk about too much of a good thing. By the 1950's the agriculture folks knew there was a problem. By the 1970's it would seem that the problem was out of hand. These days, the authorities in the worst-affected areas spare no effort to eradicate Kudzu. Or at least to try to stop it from spreading. Sounds a lot like bamboo around here.

I think one would be hard-pressed to make the case with people in Southeast that Kudzu might have any beneficial uses. In fact, however, in Southeast Asia, Kudzu is considered a food crop! According to Wikipedia, in its native China, Kudzu is considered one of the "fifty fundamental herbs" and is used as an herbal remedy for the treatment of alcohol related problems, including treating liver disease! There are even some hints that it may show promise for treating migraines, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and even cancer! Wouldn't that be a twist—if medical science discovered the ultimate cure for cancer in the plant that our neighbors are spending millions of dollars to eradicate!

Something like this kind of twist is involved in Jesus' parables from our gospel reading for today. To use a mustard seed as a means of describing God's kingdom would have been about as shocking in that day as telling a native of Alabama that Kudzu might become the next miracle cure. It just doesn't compute. Mustard was just about as virulent as Kudzu. Once it took hold in a field, it would eventually take over the whole place. It's just about impossible to eradicate. Modern farmers hate it because it gets in their crops. Ranchers hate it because it irritates the eyes of their livestock. What possible good could come from mustard seed?

But in a very real sense, that's precisely the point. God's realm of justice and peace and freedom in this world is something unexpected. It works contrary to our expectations. The eventual success of God's kingdom at transforming this world into a place of justice and peace and freedom would have been about as unexpected to the people who originally heard this parable as Kudzu turning out to cure some of our most serious ailments. It just didn't make much sense.

Notice how Jesus doesn't compare the Kingdom to a mighty Lebanon Cedar tree. The Bible speaks of these as though they are the grandest of trees and indeed, they are. Growing to a height of one hundred feet with a branch expanse of fifty feet, they are a sight to behold. Certainly wild life made their homes within its branches, but the trees were also used in building grand palaces and temples as well as for building ships used by ancient navies. These trees were highly valued commodities.

It would make sense to Jesus' listeners if he had used cedars of Lebanon as his image for the Kingdom of God – majestic, powerful, of significant value in the marketplace. Not unlike us who value big buildings, big stores, big stadiums, big churches and who chant to the mantra that "bigger is always better," the ancient Hebrews were hoping for God's Kingdom to look big and grand. It would be a force to be reckoned with and all the world would know it. Every problem, suffering and sadness would go away with popcorn and lemonade for all – well, at least for those who deserve it. Such a Kingdom of the great and all-powerful God would make sense.

But Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a tiny weed-mustard seed. In inner city America a few years ago, rival gangs were warring against each other in two particular housing projects. An elementary school was located between the two projects, and one day some school children were shot and killed in the crossfire. After

the tragic shooting, the gunfire continued and kids were afraid to go to school. School attendance dropped to 20%. Politicians weren't going to help with this problem in the projects, so a local church decided to do something about it. Volunteers from the nearby church became "walking school buses" for the children. They got children from their homes each morning and walked them to school, shielding them the whole way there, protecting them with their own bodies. These church folk were willing to take a bullet so children they didn't even know could get an education. Their efforts were so effective that the school's attendance rate gradually rose from 20% to 98%. Did the walking school buses put an end to all gang violence in America? No. But the tiny mustard seed kingdom sprouted up.

A seminary class convened in the Appalachian Mountains. A local pastor was going to teach them what ministry is like in a poverty-stricken rural area. The minister's lecture was interrupted by a phone call. A local family's furnace had blown and they couldn't afford to have it fixed. Knowing that another cold winter night was fast approaching, the family called the church for help. The students found out about the phone call and began to pass a hat around the room. By the end of the lecture, they had collected enough money to have the family's furnace repaired. Did this eradicate all poverty in Appalachia? No. But the mustard seed kingdom sprouted up.

There are millions of lonely people throughout the world, but there is a woman in North Carolina who visits the homebound members of her community every month. That's the mustard seed kingdom! There are thousands of hungry people in our country, but today someone will drop off a few items for a food bank ministry. That's the mustard seed kingdom! There are too many people who do not have a decent home, but this month, construction begins on another Habitat House. That's the mustard seed kingdom. The coronavirus pandemic continues to rage but millions will wear their masks and social distance today. Yes, even that's the mustard seed kingdom! People around this country will peacefully protest the injustices and disparity of our society. Often the mustard seed kingdom is unwanted, but it is the mustard seed kingdom. God's kingdom may seem little in the vastness of this wide world, but it's alive!

However, we've got to ask if it's enough. Is the mustard seed kingdom enough? No. It's not. For one freezing family to be warm is not enough. We want warmth for all. For one neighborhood to be safe from violence is not enough. We want all neighborhoods to be safe. For one village to be spared in a brutal war is not enough. We want peace for all nations. For one life to be spared from the coronavirus is not enough. All should be kept safe from its deadliness.

Jesus knows, ultimately, the mustard seed kingdom is not enough. Yet, he tells us how the mustard seed will one day become a tree where the birds of the air can nest. Here, Jesus uses Old Testament imagery. The prophet Ezekiel envisioned God's kingdom as a giant cedar tree where all kinds of birds could nest together in serenity. The birds symbolize people of all nations. One day, Jesus says, the mustard seed will miraculously become, not a majestic cedar, but a giant bush and it will be enough so that every person shall dwell together in peace.

Is the mustard seed kingdom enough? No; but it's enough to keep us going in our faith! Why? Because although people are still dying for no good reason, when we help one person toward life abundant, we are participating in God's eternal kingdom! When we touch people's lives in a healing way, we are participating in God's eternal rule! When we work to make justice happen-even if it's relatively small justice-we are participating in God's eternal reign!

The seed has been planted! The kingdom is little, but it's alive! And in the future, God will turn the little seed into a gigantic tree and all nations will dwell together in peace! One day, God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven! One day, God's reign will reign! One day, God's rule will rule! Until that day, while all the bad of this world towers over us, Jesus has given us reason to have faith-faith that can move mountains-faith the size of a mustard seed.

So I ask you again, what do you think God's Kingdom is like? Where is it growing in you?

PRAYER

God of surprising love, you have called us to be your treasures, to be those who love and serve you by helping meet the needs of others. Jesus reminded us that we were like mustard seeds that could grow into mighty shelters for those who felt abandoned; that we were like yeast placed in flour which causes the whole dough to rise and to be fruitful for the nourishment of God's people, that we are also nets, cast into the unknown sea, gathering people for the Lord that they might be healed and saved. You place so much hope and trust in us. Please help us not to fail you. We bring before you this day persons and situations which need your healing love. Help us to be vehicles of that word for these dear ones. Give us courage and empower us to serve you boldly and joyfully, for it is in the healing love of Christ that we offer this prayer. Amen.

HYMN #714 God of the Fertile Fields

1. God of the fertile fields, shaper of earth that yields
shaper of earth that yields our daily bread:
forth from your bounteous hand
come gifts your love has planned,
that all in every land be clothed and fed.

2. We would be stewards true, holding in trust from you
all that you give; help us in love to share,
teach us like you to care for people everywhere
that all may live.

3. As grows the hidden seed
to fruit that serves our need, so your reign grows.
Let all your toil be used,
no gift of yours abused,
no humble task refused your love bestows.

4. God of the countryside,
dear to the Christ who died to make us one:
we pledge our lives anew in faithful love to you.
Guide all we say and do. Your will be done.

BENEDICTION

Go forth to proclaim God's constant love. Live out that love for everyone you meet.

Go forth to unfold God's Word to the world.

Gather up the tears of those around you as you offer the healing grace of Jesus.

Go forth to tell stories of hope and peace. Spread the Spirit of life all around you.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit be with forever.

Amen.