

Finding God's Kingdom

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Based on Romans 8:26-39 and Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

I first met God about 30 years ago. I was a sophomore in college, and it was a hard time. My parents were fighting a nasty divorce and had placed me squarely in the middle. I was 18 years old and I felt so alone in the world. I was reading the Bible in a seminar class and that led me to the Christian fellowship on campus which was this small group of squeaky-clean kids who walked around with goofy smiles on their faces all the time, sang praise songs together and they prayed. I knew they had something I didn't have. I was sad and miserable, but they welcomed me in and I really wanted to belong. So one day, I decided to pray. It was, frankly, a really small prayer. But, when I realized, about 24 hours later, that my small prayer had been answered, I felt something that I don't recall ever feeling before: *Loved*. I felt loved.

In retrospect, I'm not sure that God did much more than change *my* heart about something very small that was weighing on me, but it didn't matter. I had denied God, cursed God, run away from God for years at that point, and the moment I asked for something, God said 'yes'! Suddenly I felt so very loved. Suddenly I was walking around with one of those goofy smiles on my face.

I would love to tell you that that's where this story ends, it was all sunshine and rainbows and goofy smiles with friends for the next 30 years, but that would make a very short sermon indeed. There are some who preach that kind of message about becoming a Christian. That if you really know the love of God it will dispel all hardship, sadness and even ill health. There is a popular version of this message called the Prosperity gospel, preached and practiced in notable mega churches all around this country. And it is indeed compelling to think that there is this loving God who will only bless us and nothing else if we just commit.

Unfortunately, our reading from Romans today promises pretty much the opposite, why would we need to be reminded that God's love will be there through all such trials and tribulations unless we should expect to face such trials and tribulations? Over the last 30 years, I have found

that life is, in fact, quite difficult. But every once in a while, especially in the midst of real struggle, I am reminded that that love is still there, it's always there.

I moved to Bangor just about 2 years ago to do a 3-year residency in Family medicine. And these have been a rough couple of years for me, in all ways except for one. I knew that when I moved here, I wanted to find a church community, it was so high on my priority list that I started visiting Episcopal churches my very first Sunday in town, when I walked through those doors at the back of our sanctuary. You see, I started with the church closest to my house and figured I would move out in distance until I found one that fit. But I've never visited another church. What I found here was exactly what I was looking for. There was something about this place. There was something about *you*. I have never felt like a stranger here, even though that's what I was when I walked through the door.

For the past few weeks, we have been learning about the Kingdom of heaven through the parables of Jesus. God is sowing, scattering seed, allowing it to fall where it will and when it finds fertile soil it will grow, grow into something amazing: a field of wheat, or some of those seeds will grow into mustard trees, which to be clear, are not what we think of as mustard, the herb we can use leaves or seeds from to season a variety of dishes. No Jesus is talking instead about an evergreen tree that can grow to 20 feet tall and provides shade and habitat for many animals.

And the kingdom is like a pearl or a treasure, it is something that when you see it, is so precious you must have it at almost any cost. And we have learned is those seeds are scattered into the soil of our lives, of our hearts. And when those seeds find fertile ground in us, they grow into something amazing, that bears fruit, and shelters others, and provides rest, and is so precious, it is a treasure. The kingdom is *in* you; the kingdom *is* you. You are the treasure, each and every one of you. And those seeds growing inside of you, inside of me, the kingdom is God's love. The kingdom of God is love.

When I walked through those doors 2 years ago, what I found inside this place was the kingdom of God, what I found was God's love, what I found was you. I found a community that was welcoming, not perfect, but growing and nurturing. The kingdom of God was clearly here. God's love and Grace were all around in all of you. And so I never looked beyond this place for a church.

Now, by the time I had been living in Bangor for 6 months, I knew that my residency program was not such a good fit. I began thinking about leaving, going somewhere else to do my training. I was really struggling. And I prayed. I asked God to give me a sign to guide me, should I stay here, or should I go somewhere else? And just like that day, 30 years ago, I got an answer very quickly. The next Sunday, I was asked to consider joining the vestry. I doubt most people would consider that an answer to prayer. But in my heart, I knew that this was my answer. God was saying “you belong here”. I have never felt like I belonged anywhere, I have always felt like an outsider, but you, St. John’s, were the answer to my prayer. I belong here.

Our Roman’s passage does not end in such a way to give us hope that God’s love comes with smooth sailing, but what it tells us is that it is always ours. God loves us and the gospel parables say you are a gift; you are a pearl; you are a treasure. You are loved. That doesn’t mean our life here will be without struggle, or without conflict. But I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angles, nor rulers, nor interpersonal conflict, nor loss, nor political polarization, nor conflicting opinions, nor theological differences, nor budgetary challenges, nor socioeconomic differences, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor anything else in heaven or earth can separate us from the love of God.

Many sermons challenge us to look outward to something beyond us. But I want to challenge you today to look inward, to see that you are a gift, to look around you, to see God’s love that is in this place. To see the pearl sitting next to you, and the treasure on the other side of the room, to see the tiny seeds just starting to grow in some lives and the giant mustard trees of faithful works that have sprung out of others. Find someone you know you disagree with on something, anything; it doesn’t have to be big, or it can be so big that the only thing you can comfortably talk about is the weather. As you picture this person, remember that they are also a treasure, just like you. And as you are thinking of all the treasure that is here today, remember, this is God’s kingdom, God’s kingdom is love. God’s kingdom is *you*. Amen