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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X27
8 Pentecost (Proper 12A) 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist
Sunday 30 July 2017

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Mt. 13:31-33, 44-52

A Hidden Gift

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field" (Mt. 13).

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor points out that one of the most difficult parts of believing in God is trying to talk about God.¹ When someone asks you why you believe, or how your faith makes a practical difference in your life, it is hard to provide an answer. When we finally do say something the words seem so inadequate to our experience. Something is inevitably lost.

On the evening of May 24, 1738 after a period of despair, John Wesley "very unwillingly" went to church. He listened to someone reading Martin Luther's preface to Romans. And in his *Journal* he writes about what happened next. "[W]hile [the reader] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins..."²

That's it. It may not sound like much but this experience of a strangely warmed heart changed Wesley's whole life. He went on to preach an average of two sermons a day. In 52 years he traveled 250,000 miles on horseback.³ Although he lived and died as an Anglican priest, the Methodist, Pentecostal, Assembly of God denominations, most of the fastest growing churches around the world today, were inspired by his teaching.

When the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) died they found sewn into his clothing a written account of the most powerful experience he had had in his life. It read, "FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt joy, peace. The world forgotten, and everything except God. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy... Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ. Total submission to Jesus Christ..."⁴ Hearing what Pascal wrote, we know something extraordinary happened to him, but we cannot at all grasp it. It belongs to him and God alone.

We cannot easily find the words which can communicate our own experiences of the holy. But that is not our only problem. We have difficulty even understanding what counts as a religious experience.

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes, "The speech of God is and remains the mystery of God supremely in its secularity. When God speaks to [human beings], this event never demarcates itself from other events in such a way that

it might not be interpreted... as part of these other events."⁵ In other words we never know for sure when or how God is addressing us. I believe that God speaks to us even through our unconscious thoughts. This might be as simple as a sense of gratitude at seeing the morning light through the fog at dawn on a summer day.⁶

We require ordinary things to talk about the holy. And so we do our best to describe God. Meeting God is like falling in love, like erasing all the pain we have ever known, or totally forgetting your self. It is like being present at the creation of the whole world, or becoming really free for the first time, or feeling like you will never die. As a surfer God breaking through to us feels like that moment as you tuck in the tube behind a curtain of translucent water and time just seems to stop.

We can't get it exactly right but we can give a sense for what we mean. Jesus understands how we need ordinary words to interrupt our habitual ways of experiencing the world. The right image can provoke a change of heart that might just save our life. And so Jesus persists with comparisons that perplex, stretch and delight us.

This morning he repeats a simple phrase over and over. "ÔOmoi÷a e'sti«n hJ basilei÷a tw◇n oujranw◇n), "the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Mt. 13). Before we go too much further I want to tell you one thing about this gospel. When you compare Matthew to the other gospel writers he stands out as being more intensely interested in the final judgment. He is the one who writes the most about "weeping and gnashing of teeth."⁷ He's the only one who tells parables about separating the sheep from the goats, or the wise and foolish virgins (Mt. 25).

We all have a different tolerance for ambiguity and in comparison to others I think our brother Matthew may want everything to be clearer, more a matter of black and white, good and evil. Although I am more likely to see both good and bad in every person I appreciate that Matthew warns us that a lot is at stake.

My point is that these parables about the kingdom of heaven do not primarily seem to be about judgment. In one a tiny seed (oŒ mikro/teron) grows into such a great tree that the birds of heaven nest in its branches. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is also like the small amount of yeast that a woman hides in the midst of grain which causes it to become bread.

Before we can catch our breath or wonder what these metaphors have in common Jesus throws some other ones at us. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who finds treasure in a field, reburies it and then "in his joy" sells all he has so that he can buy the field.

One of my favorite images in the Bible, for very personal reasons, comes next. The kingdom is like an *emporio*, related to our word, *emporium*, that is a merchant searching for fine pearls. Finding the pearl of great value, he sells everything in order to buy it. It feels like Jesus addresses me personally here. My wife's Hawaiian name means pearl and I would give up everything I own for her.

But Jesus does not stop. The kingdom is like a net thrown into the sea. What I love about this one is that Jesus does not use the Greek word for fish. The net catches simply "out of every kind" (*e'k pantoΰ ge÷nouß sunagou/shØ*) without exactly specifying what. After all these images of finding things this refers to the experience of being found. Each of us is unique. We have such different stories, yet together we celebrate being found by God in this net of love.

For me what unifies all these pictures of the kingdom of heaven is the theme of hiddenness. The key word for what the woman does with her yeast is *enkrupto*. It is related to word *encrypt* (*e'ne÷kruyen*). She hides the yeast in the grain. In these stories what is hidden and small becomes big and life sustaining. What is hidden and unrecognized turns out to be worth all that we have.

The theologian Karl Barth writes that our inability to constantly experience God arises out of the limits of our existence and perception. We are human and God is God. We cannot even think God. But God overcomes this distance. He writes, "God's word has for our sakes stepped forth out of its self-contained existence into the circle of things which we can know." He describes faith not as believing but as a gift to us that must be "seized again and again." This gift is the recognition that our whole life is lived in God.⁸

Great musicians, artists and writers refer to this hidden experience of God in different ways. Composer George Gershwin (1898-1937) writes simply, "I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise." The twentieth century organist Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) says, "Certain people are annoyed that I believe in God. But I want people to know that God is present in everything, in the concert hall, in the ocean, on a mountain, even on the underground."⁹

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) describes himself as a watchman whose, "profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature."¹⁰ The novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) writes, "The unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth."¹¹

In a letter to his sister Alice the American philosopher William James (1842-1910) writes that, "the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude, in which when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply

and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says, 'this is the real me.'¹²

This week Ellen Clark-King talked to me about spiritual practices inspired by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). She suggested that for one week each of us could adopt the following practice for seeking out God. At the end of each day could we ask ourselves two questions. The first is, "when were you most alive?" And the second is, "when were you most detached?" In these questions and their answers we will listen to the Holy.

Where do we find God and the words to share our discoveries? Jesus teaches that these come to us in the most ordinary experiences, in the most common words we know. On the one hand you may vividly recall a moment when you felt your heart "strangely warmed," or even worried that you might be extinguished by the FIRE, the certainty, the heartfelt joy and peace of the God of Abraham. Or you may wonder if "the unapproachable mystery" of God has ever even talked to you at all in the quietness of your unconscious.

I pray that Jesus, with his comparisons that perplex, stretch and delight us, will shelter us under his wing. As we dig for treasure, while the kingdom leavens the bread of our lives, I pray that we recognize the pearl of great value. I pray that we may rejoice in the gift that Jesus offers every day, in the only treasure worth having – the gift of a whole life lived in God. Brothers and sisters, may the net of God's love draw us ever closer together!

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Seeds of Heaven," *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 39.

² John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html>.

³ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 368.

⁴ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 335.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part One* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 165.

⁶ If this were not enough, the words we use, and even the entire system of meaning that we depend on gets worn out too. Think about that formerly obscure religious word "awesome" and what it meant in 1957 and how it is used today. The same is true of "cool," "sin," "reconciliation," and today, "sad." I have in mind here the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and the work of Robert Neville regarding the truth about broken symbols.

⁷ Except Lk. 18:38.

⁸ "If in this event we link up with the fact that we have perhaps believed before, and if in this event we receive the promise that we will again believe in the future, if there is thus a state of believing which embraces past, present and future, faith itself is not identical with this state of believing. As distinct from it, it is never something which is there already. It is always a gift which has to be seized again and again" (706). "It is not to be denied but rather affirmed that in certain humanly identifiable moments and situations, not simply in recollection or expectation but in the concrete present of faith, we are in fact humbly and thankfully aware in a very special way, not merely of our state of believing, but of our real faith, and therefore of our whole life as a life lived in God, and that in this sense we gladly recall such

moments as certainly significant" (708). Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part Two* Tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956), 699-708.

⁹ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007) 143, 472.

¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981-) 4:55.

¹¹ Robert D. Richards, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 477.

¹² *Ibid.*, 181.