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Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Recipe for Faith”

The longer I live the more amazed I am at the random memories in my mind. I don't know why but certain things have stayed with me over the years, and every now and then I spin through those experiences like binge watching some old TV comedy series on Netflix. One of my weird, random memories is a spelling test when I was in 7th or 8th grade. Back in those days we didn't have the internet or spell check. We were given word lists to study and then we were tested on our spelling proficiency. I've never been very good at it. Spelling has always been a struggle for me, so spelling tests ramped up my anxiety. Our English teacher did things a little differently than other teachers at the time. Instead of giving us sheets of paper with lists of words, he gave us a box of small cards with the word on one side and the definition of the word on the other with a sentence using the word in the right context. He liked to combine spelling tests with vocabulary tests, a double whammy as far as I was concerned. He'd say, "It's no good to correctly spell a word if you don't know what it means." There's one word I've always remembered from one of those tests. I don't know why. I can't say why this particular word stays with me, to the point that I can still picture the little card and see the word printed there in my mind. The word is "permeate." Permeate - not the hardest word to spell, I know, but as a kid it was a brand new word to me. I'd never spoken it or used it in a sentence, nor did I have any idea what it meant. On the test, I nailed the spelling "p-e-r-m-e-a-t-e," and its meaning, "to spread throughout something, to completely impact a substance, to go through and through." It's funny to think about it, how the word "permeate" is so ingrained in my thinking that it has "permeated" my memories, so much so that when I recall my growing up, "permeate" is always there.

Jesus was a creative teacher in his own right. He told short little stories, called parables, which create an image in our minds that open them to experience a deep truth about God's kingdom. In the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we find a series of parables, each one revealing something about the way God is active in our lives. The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a significant bush with room for all the birds...The kingdom is like a woman who bakes bread with yeast that leavens the whole loaf...The kingdom is like finding a treasure in a field, or finding a pearl of great value, or like casting a net into the sea and catching all kinds of fish...Jesus creates these images for us, not just so we have a picture of the kingdom in our minds but so we will experience the Kingdom of God. And, notice with me, what happens in each of the parables Jesus tells. Something happens that changes the situation. The seed grows. The bread is produced. The field is purchased. The pearl is bought. The fish are separated. Knowing about the Kingdom of God means nothing if we don't experience the Kingdom of God, and when we experience the Kingdom of God something happens in our lives. We change. We act. We make a commitment. We decide what is of value to us. The Kingdom of God isn't a place. It's not even something we build. The Kingdom of God is the way God impacts and intersects with our lives, and the result works some kind of change in us so that we're not the same as we were before.

Let's remember that one of the first things Jesus says about all of this is that the Kingdom of God "has come near." (Matt. 4:17) This is the first lesson before any of the others, the time is now, God is active and influencing our lives and world at this moment. Have we learned this lesson? Are we aware of how God is impacting our lives right now? This can be challenging, especially given the way the world is. We're easily distracted, and for obvious reasons. We think about, talk about, read about, and hear reports about the pandemic all of the time. We need to know what's happening, how it's impacting our daily lives, what the current restrictions are on our movements and health, and we want to know when the world will get back to normal. This concern isn't just a once in a while thought for us, it's constant. Again, this is understandable but I'm not sure we are constant in our thinking about the ways God is involved in our lives. Think about this with me. A microscopic virus has, and here's the word, permeated our whole experience. There's really no aspect of life, whether that be at home, at work, in our community, in our schools, in our church, where Covid-19 is not influencing what we do. It's got a powerful hold on us. But, what about God? Jesus wants us to know that God's presence and constant influence is connected to all that we are and all that we have. The bad news is that the virus is still with us. The good news for today is that God is, too, and I'm inviting all of us to renew our commitment to be aware of how God's kingdom reality shapes every aspect of our lives.

In the list of parables before us the one that is speaking most strongly to me is the one about the woman who puts the yeast in the flour. Jesus says it leavened the whole loaf. Some of you who practice the art of bread baking know what happens if you forget to add the yeast. Without the yeast, bread turns out flat and hard. By contrast, the soft, fluffy and pleasing quality of artisan loaves is because the unseen and small measure of yeast has worked its magic producing a delicious result. God is like that. We can't point to it and say, "There that's God." But

with God mixed in with what we think, what we do, including our judgements about others and our decisions about what we value, the result is beautiful and good.

Here's how Jesus' teaching about the baker woman challenges us today. Whether we're thinking about the pandemic, or the politics of the day, our relationships or some issue in our own lives, our life with God is already in the mix. Our task is to embrace that and allow God's unlimited ingredients of love and grace to "permeate" us through and through.

In the parable the baker woman adds the yeast. In our lives, Jesus wants us not to forget to add God's perspective all of the time and in everything. This is the final thought today, a vital faith requires our intentionality to mix in God's perspective in all we do. Let's do that. Let's begin each day with an invitation to ourselves to recognize God's place in all we think, say and do. Without it, life is hard and flat and less than we want. With God, life is a nourishing and life-giving experience. Can you taste it? It's good. May it be so, now and always. Amen.