

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

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

Do you have that life lesson that you just keep having to relearn? Do you know what I mean? No matter how many situations you find yourself in, you react in one way. (You have, in other words, a certain narrative that you totally think is real, and you respond to it.) Then you learn, AGAIN, that you have the wrong narrative—that things work differently than your assumptions. Maybe that's too abstract.

Here's mine. I think it's all up to me. I have tremendous innate confidence in my power to simply WILL. Now, this has served me well at times—I have done things, like live in Berlin as a single mom with a 2 year old, that everyone else said were stupid to try or impossible to make happen. Really in large part due to my belief that there is ALWAYS a way, I, well, I found a way. That's good. But much more often, this WILL issue makes me assume too much responsibility, take too much in, and stress myself out of my gourd thinking that it's all up to ME to MAKE things happen.

What my time with these magical people at Greenville College has shown me is how little it is up to me. In other words (and this will be a theme here), the kingdom of God does not happen due to my amazing will power, or even my decisions, or by overwhelming force. **With the kingdom of God, a little goes a long way. AND the kingdom of God rarely looks like what I think it looks like. AND it all comes from God.**

My time with my magical peeps at GC has shown me the beauty and the relief that comes with BEING WRONG; so many times, the good has come about in spite of my will, and it has been a much better, deeper, truer Good than my goofy idea. It is deep relief, DEEP relief, to see how little I am in charge of making happen; and how the kingdom of God, like a small stream of water, finds its way through seemingly impossible barriers.

But let's not add more similes to the mix—Jesus does just fine with his. The kingdom of God, like a tiny bit of a potentially corrupting leaven, transforms the world. The kingdom of God, like an annoying weed seed, finds its way. It is certainly not much of our doing—really. It is more often about our getting out of the way... SO, “The Kingdom of God”: I do not think it means what you think it means. You're welcome for that one.

So here's where I'm getting that from: take a look at those first four parables (although I will mostly focus on the first 2). What do we have? A mustard seed, leaven, a deceptive worker (really—look there!) and a merchant. Commentators have noted that the worker doesn't tell the owner about the treasure—he just sneakily buys the field. And a merchant—this is not the glorified capitalist of our day, but rather someone without a lot of social cache. And we all know by now that the mustard plant in Israel was really a weed, springing up out of seemingly nowhere to mess up your field. And leaven—well, now, you Old Testament types know that leaven is what you must purge from your house

during Passover, and what causes, if left to its own devices, corruption, decay and death. So. The kingdom of God is like a weed, or like a growth that can decay? Oh yes—because the Kingdom of God has no obligation to line up with OUR definitions of good things. The kingdom of God is far more wily and creative and bigger than those paltry definitions. We just have trouble, don't we, letting go of them?

So these first two parables point to the theme I mentioned earlier: **A little goes a long way; and the kingdom doesn't look like you think it should.** A little seed, a touch of leavening, can utterly transform their environs, taking over and overwhelming, chemically altering, what is present. And what does the transforming are things, here, that the Israelites would have found either obnoxious or dangerous: a weed seed and the unclean power of corrupting leaven. After all, a little corruption goes a long way. ☺ Jesus' parables, in their very *structure*, confound our expectations of the kingdom, because while on the surface they seem obvious, they undermine our expectations. Where are the triumphant heroes, the clean shining city, the gold and silver—where are all the signs of a kingdom that *wins*? There are none here, not in these two parables (and keep in mind that in the latter two, the emphasis is on the behavior of the finder, not on the material of the treasure). The kingdom of God is not like a ground invasion of overwhelming force. The kingdom of God is not like a parade of victory. The kingdom of God is not sheer numbers dominating everything else. The kingdom of God is small. Insidious. It worms its way in where it isn't wanted. It eats away at its surroundings; or it shoots up overnight, covering over the 'proper crop', the crop that is valued by society as 'useful' or 'valuable'.

This really should undermine and erode completely, if we would let it, our sense of how to 'get things done properly' and even what 'proper' looks like. It really should give us confidence that the smallest action, the tiniest touch, has transformational power. We don't need to dominate the airwaves and dictate the politics; our place may not be in the clean and clinical halls of power, but elsewhere, doing other things. And our society may not find what we do valuable or proper—and the people we align ourselves with may also not seem very 'wheat-like', but rather more weedy. God's ways are not our own, and our way is *anti*-parable, isn't it? Our way is to overwhelm, and dominate, and get our way. Our way is to look good doing it. ☺ Like—you knew this was coming—Jacob.

I have to return to Jacob. He's fascinating because he is SO US. Wow. Now I am going to repeat Jessica, but only because it bears repeating: dude, this guy is a manipulative jerk. SOOOOOO confident in his righteousness, loved WAY too much by his mother, sure of himself and his decisions, ready to make the world give him what he wants. He is the anti-parable. In this soap opera of a marriage tale, though, he gets out-Jacobed. Laban out-maneuvers the manipulator, and Jacob is left with a plain, unattractive wife he doesn't want, and another seven years of labor for the hot chick. Aside from the hot chick, Jacob and I, we're similar, aren't we? We think that we can, through force of will, make things happen. But God sneaks in (and notice that God is not mentioned at all in this story—Jacob doesn't need God to come in with his narrative! He likes his own narrative—up until now). God sneaks in through the plain Leah, the unloved, heartbreaking Leah—who nevertheless has many sons, sons who form tribes, tribes

whose offspring become kings, tribes one of whose offspring becomes the King of Kings. While Jacob is utterly focused in the opposite direction, God is quietly working God's way.

Which brings us to Paul, to one of the only passages in Romans I can read with unbridled enthusiasm. That last line makes me tear up every time I read it. Here is an apt description of Jacob, and the disciples, and indeed human beings in general. Paul is describing the human condition, lest we, in our doing and scrambling and arguing and willing, forget: we don't even know how to pray (in spite of Jesus' trying to teach us). We are beset on every side by forces outside our control. We are beset from within by our own forces, our desires and fears and what Anne LaMott calls our "tiny little control issues." We do not know the good, all too often, despite philosophy's best attempts. The good for us is not getting what we *want*—even when we think our vision is in line with God's. The good for us is not winning the day, or getting our way. It's not getting the pretty girl or the perfect crop or even the pearl of great price. God knows the good for us, which is, as Sam Wells says, "to look like Jesus." God uses even our deepest weaknesses and our most shameful sins—for good. God decides and brings the good for us. God can transform an orderly field into a wild, tangled home for lost ones. God can take the flour dust and imbue it with life abundant—even if that life is more dangerous and energetic than we'd like sometimes. God can take the trouble we cause—and oh, we cause so much trouble, so much pain and blood and horror—and refuse, downright refuse to let any of that separate us from Him.

Hear this, I say to myself: hear this with ears that hear. God says to us Jacobs: stand down a little. Just a little. Stop trying so hard to make the kingdom of God appear as we think it should. Stop trying to get your own way. Stop trying to pray well. I must again paraphrase Kierkegaard: "Ah, if there were only one so wretched that he could not pray—a sigh is enough—a sigh too deep for words—for to sigh for Him to also to come here." God is sneaking in, is in already, in the midst of both our pretty plans and our violent misdeeds, ready to confound them all. And nothing—neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation—can separate us from that. Praise be to God.