

**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 12-Year A- The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 7.30.23
Genesis 29:15-28, Psalm 105:1-11, 45b, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

In the first days of July 1993—now 30 years ago—Stewart and I purchased our first new car. (We've only purchased two new cars, and this was the first.) It was a Saturn and because Saturn was an exciting and upcoming automobile company, to make a local splash, East Bay Saturn dealers were giving away tickets to the Oakland A.'s July 4th weekend baseball game. We were living in Oakland at the time and the A.'s were our team, so this was a very big deal. Upon arrival at the game, not only did we get free parking, but every Saturn owner was ushered to a special parking place right next to the ballpark and then invited to enter a big tent-covered area where there was a delicious, free all-you-can-eat BBQ. Tony LaRussa was the A.'s well-known manager at the time and while we enjoyed BBQ, he talked about his strategies as a manager and hopes for the A.'s. The pre-game feast was fun and festive, generous, inspirational and delicious.

And there was more! During the game, there was an announcement that if the A.'s scored more than 7 runs *and* won the game, anyone with a game ticket could go into one of the best local pie-making restaurants and receive a free slice of pie! The A.'s were down, until the bottom of the 9th inning, when they scored a few runs to put them over the magic 7-run number and win the game! *And that wasn't all.* Since the game was on the 4th of July weekend, after the game, everyone was invited to go down to the grass field to watch a special fireworks extravaganza. Lying on the grass, gazing up at the sky, a slight breeze blowing in the still-warm, just right 76 degree weather—what a night! *And even that's not all that happened!* Re-winding back to the 7th inning stretch, as I was looking at the huge electronic billboard, a message popped up that said, *Nina, Will you marry me? R.* Ordinarily, I might have just thought, "Oh, that's sweet!" But Nina and R. happened to be two very close friends of ours who, we knew, were also at the game. What started out as a fun night just kept getting more and more amazing and abundant.

This morning's gospel makes me think of that experience because, after telling longer, more complicated parables about the kingdom of heaven the past couple of weeks, Jesus really gets going here, with today's parables coming fast and furious, one after the other. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed! And not only that, it is like yeast mixed in with flour, leavening the entire loaf! Or, if that doesn't speak to you, there's more! It is like a treasure hidden in a field. And that's not all! The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who searched high and low for a valuable pearl and an empty net that instantly filled when thrown into the sea.

Back in the day, people viewed the world differently. The world was flat, held up by gigantic pillars or huge turtles at each corner. The heavenly skies, which contained the stars, sun and moon, were directly above. Beyond that heaven was the heavenly dome—which contained all the waters. Every once in a while, the dome cracked open and water was released in the form of rain, sleet or snow. Beyond that heavenly dome, in the topmost layer, that is where the kingdom of heaven, God's dwelling place, existed. (Michael Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Vision for the Church in an Unjust World*, p. 26)

Right from the get-go, beginning in Genesis, God is not only way up there, but down here, intimately involved with the life of God's people, their cares and concerns. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel—where God not only met them, time and time again in many different places, but also called them by name—were mind-blowing. Today's psalm, which celebrates God's faithfulness to the covenant, is a remarkable celebration of how the ancient, majestic, holy Creator of the heavens remains committed to relationship with the people way down here. (Oh my people, will you marry me? G.) Time and again, in the stories and the histories and the songs in the Hebrew Bible, we hear, *Wait! There's more!* And then, in the parables, it happens again! And this time, Jesus indicates that God isn't in a place way out there, caring about people so much that the people gain a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven every once in a while, but that God is here, there and everywhere. That God is as fully present here on earth, as in heaven. The layers of the various heavens are not only collapsed so that the kingdom of heaven is close to the kingdom of earth, but the kingdom of heaven is here.

You might say, *What's the big deal? We left that cosmological view of the many-tiered universe behind a long time ago.* We might have left that cosmological view of the many-tiered universe behind, but the notion that God is in all, with all, generously and abundantly and fiercely loving all of us into wholeness is still a tough sell. Even as I was thinking about the experience on that July 4th weekend 30 years ago, I thought, "Well, Saturn didn't last! The generosity of that evening didn't generate profit; the business model of no-haggling wasn't sustainable." I am not saying that Saturn was a company that practiced Kingdom Math, but the notion that God resides in some particular places (some churches) or some particular people more than others is alive and well. But wait, there's more! These parables overturn not only the where and how God is present and active, but completely overhaul our vision what the kingdom of heaven looks like and what is of value in the kingdom of heaven in the here and now and who is of value in the here and now. The smallest of seeds grows, but it doesn't grow to be a Douglas Fir, a Western Red Cedar, or anything grand. It becomes the greatest of shrubs! A shrub! What faith community or person aspires to be a shrub? And that's not all! Who is valued in the kingdom of heaven includes a merchant who might have had assets, but was restlessly seeking the pearl and a nameless woman with no assets, getting up in the wee hours to mix dough to make the daily bread. And, wait, there's more! It includes all those who have been or continue to be, excluded or not of value at all. All those who are dismissed or diminished for being foolish, or weak, or too young or too old. All those who are forgotten and the ones who are forgetting. According to these parables, they are treasures. Pearls. Full of yeast. Worth everything to God.

Jesus didn't tell these parables to convince people that the kingdom of heaven was close, but rather to reveal just how present and active the kingdom of heaven is in the here and now. It seems to be hidden much of the time, but in reality it is bursting out, all around. Abundantly. Notice the kingdom of heaven all around you, Jesus seems to be saying, but more than that: look for how it is growing, thriving, flourishing, in ways big and small. The kingdom of heaven might not show up on an electric billboard, flashing in bright lights like that marriage proposal from R. to Nina thirty years ago. In thinking

about the abundance of these parables, here are a few additional parables that spring to my mind, just from this week:

- The kingdom of heaven is like three pileated woodpeckers that show up in a tree on just the right day, at just the right time, beacons.
- The kingdom of heaven is like a bbq dinner where everyone leaves with leftovers.
- The kingdom of heaven is like three brothers getting together to mourn and tell stories of their fourth brother who just died.
- The kingdom of heaven is like someone who has chosen to stay sober today—whether it is the first day or the fifty-first day, or week or year.
- The kingdom of heaven is like the bunnies who dart in and out of the bushes of Trillium forest at all times of the day, but particularly at dusk.

Based on what you have seen or heard this week, how would you describe the Kingdom of Heaven growing and flourishing in our midst? How, by the end of today might elaborate even further on this sentence, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” There’s no end to the ways that Love incarnate is present in the here and now, with us and for us and in us.

By the way, Nina said *YES!*