

**Readings:** 1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Grace to you and peace from God – hidden and revealed in the life and the death of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Well, if you came this morning hoping to hear a “farewell” sermon... you’re outta luck. It’s true this is the last sermon I will preach as your pastor at Custer Lutheran Fellowship... It’s true that (thanks to so much help from so many of you) 95% of our family’s belongings are packed up in a storage unit... It’s true that I have about 4 days left as your pastor before we put Washington state license plates on our van...

...and maybe there’s good news for you in these things, but to me there’s hardly room to catch my breath, let alone preach a “farewell” sermon with all that’s going on in our scripture readings for today.

The Gospel reading would be enough in itself. The last few weeks, we’ve heard Jesus take ordinary stuff like seeds and farmers, wheat and weeds; Jesus takes this ordinary stuff and crams it in one end of this *parable machine* of his.

You know what I’m talking about – the kind of machine you’d find in a cartoon or a Dr. Seuss book, where you put ordinary stuff in one end – the end conveniently labeled with a sign: “In.” And then it gets pumped through pipes and dropped through ducts and smashed into cylinders while the machine whirrs and steams, whistles and grinds until it comes out the other end conveniently labeled: “Out.” Where it’s something strangely simple yet astonishingly extraordinary.

Well, the last two weeks Jesus started with “normal” speed on this *parable machine* of his. One parable each week: “Listen, a farmer went out to scatter seed...” Then last week: “Look, the kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in a field...”

But then (should’ve seen it coming, it always happens in the cartoons), Jesus slyly reaches back behind the *parable machine* and flips a hidden little switch – a switch that conveniently determines the machine’s speed.

And this week, at first, Jesus switches it “just” to *ridiculous* speed. And the machine starts whirring and steaming, whistling and grinding, spitting out a couple parables at a time. *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...*

But then Jesus switches it one more time. This time to *ludicrous* speed.

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field... The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls... The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea, which caught fish of every kind...*

And the parable machine spits out one parable after another – whirring and steaming, whistling and grinding until you’re covered in this large pile of parables and only then does the whirring and steaming, the whistling and grinding stop. All at once. And Jesus smiles and says, “Have you understood all this?” And you nod, wide-eyed from underneath the pile and reply, “Oh, yes. We understand. Thank you Jesus.” And then you faint a cartoon faint.

Put it another way: How does one catch one’s breath, let alone tend to all the goodbyes and thank-you’s as we wade knee-deep and wide-eyed this morning through all these parables.

It’s a good thing we have Paul’s letter to the Romans to catch us in our cartoon fall as we faint wearily from the weight of all these parables.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words... [For] we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose...”

You’ve seen it hanging on walls, framed. You’ve seen it in calligraphy on a confirmation card or that Facebook banner. Perhaps it would make a great farewell sermon: “It’s all going to work out. The Spirit will help and guide you. Farewell!” And maybe that would be enough.

But, I wonder if the good news of God in Christ Jesus isn’t a two-edged sword and Paul’s words cut one way. It isn’t as if Paul’s words aren’t true. In fact, they are words we turn to in our greatest weakness.

The words I just read as well as these closing words of that eighth chapter of Romans are words we turned to not much more than a week ago when faced with one of the most difficult funerals I've experienced in these 8 years as your pastor.

*Who then will separate us – WHAT then will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through [the one] who loved us. For I am convinced that 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Maybe, at certain times, *that* is enough.

But the parables – this wonderful, astonishing, magnificent pile of parables before us that confuse and confound us, that call us (dare we say, *cut us?*) into something else. Dare we say, they *cut us deeper* into the good news of God in Christ Jesus?

Eugene Peterson calls the parables *narrative time bombs*.<sup>1</sup> Just when you think you've got it figured out (just disconnect the yellow wire, then the reattach the red wire); just when you think you've got enough (the timer stops with three seconds remaining and you breath that sigh of relief); just when you're comfortable, just when you're satisfied...

The parable explodes in your face with the reminder that the good news of God in Christ Jesus does not merely satisfy and comfort; the kingdom of heaven is not some puzzle to be figured out before your final farewell or some competitive rat race where the bottom line and the finish line are one.

The kingdom of heaven – the good news of God in Christ Jesus is like a noxious weed. Sure, it starts as a tiny, innocent little mustard seed. But then it grows. You think you can root it out? Oh no... It'll beat you to the finish line every time. But, oh, when you let it go, when you just sit down in the middle of it all and give up the race, watch how it has grown into a home all around you, and not just for the birds.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted on "Sermon Brainwave" #365 for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 27, 2014 (www.workingpreacher.org).

The kingdom of heaven – the good news of God in Christ Jesus is like a little bit of yeast... Have you ever worked with yeast, with rising dough – especially on a warm summer day? Do you know how much three measures of flour is? It's enough to make over *one hundred pounds* of dough. Do you even have a mixing bowl big enough to contain a hundred pounds of dough? Is your theology big enough to box up and package *this* God?

We're not talking about a dozen donuts neatly packaged here. We're talking about over a *hundred pounds of dough*. Grab a friend and start kneading, stoke the oven's fire and ask yourself if there's "enough" for everyone here to eat and be satisfied... if there's "enough" for all to eat and be filled with the goodness of God. And leftovers to spare.

The kingdom of heaven – the good news of God in Christ Jesus is like *treasure hidden in a field*, it's like *a merchant in search of fine pearls*. Don't kid yourself – you will give up everything for it. It won't even be a choice. It won't even be a contest.

I'm not talking about putting all your stuff in storage and moving to another state, just with the stuff you can cram into a minivan... I'm talking about giving up *everything* you think is "yours" for this precious gift – the kingdom of heaven, the good news of God in Christ Jesus – *because* God first gave everything up for you [*look at the cross*].

The kingdom of heaven – the good news of God in Christ Jesus is like a *fishing-net that is widely cast into the sea*; cast so widely that it catches fish of every kind – ever family, every nation, every race; cast so widely that (*oh!*) the good and the "bad" are all caught up in God's net of mercy and grace. Things we have done and things we have left undone, they're all caught up in God's net. And *God* will separate what is good and will make sure it endures to the end. And *God* (not us) will take out what is "bad," what is "evil" and it will not last to the end.

There's another place in the Bible that speaks of this – it says: *weeping will be no more, suffering and death will be no more for the first things have passed away*. You wanted a farewell sermon? There it is – nothing (no thing) that separates us from God will last to the end.

Do you understand all this? "Oh, yes. We understand. Thank you, thank you so much Jesus."

*You don't have a clue. And neither do I. Thanks be to God!*

Still... Life. At times, it does seem like a great big machine that you and I have been crammed into the end marked "In"... In the middle of it all there's so much whirring and steaming, whistling and grinding. The speed of it all seems to only increase, doesn't it? ...from ridiculous to ludicrous. But the kingdom of heaven is not just about what lies beyond the point where you and I will be spit out the end marked "Out" as (by the grace of God) something strangely simple, yet astonishingly extraordinary. The kingdom of heaven is as much about asking here and now: How do you even begin to stop and catch your breath at the wonder of it all?

And there we are. Here we are, really. Week after week, taking a moment to sit together in stillness and silence. All the machines stop. The whirring and steaming, the whistling and grinding are over. And we live in the gift of this moment – to sit in wonder at God's presence among us through the life and the death, the body and the blood of Jesus the Christ – hidden among it all. But revealed in the fullness of time, if only for one moment [*look at the cross*].

And there in the stillness and the silence, perhaps it is enough to hear this reminder – that the Spirit *indeed* helps us in our weakness (not in our strength or having-it-togetherness, but in *our weakness*); *for truly, we don't have a clue* – *we don't know how to pray as we ought*, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words [*silence*].

...with sighs too deep for words to express the gratitude.

...with sighs too deep for words to express the goodbyes.

...with sighs too deep for words to express.

You don't have a clue and neither do I. Thanks be to God that *nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*. Amen.