

“little words & big Word” (26July2020)
Matt13:31-33,44-52; Rom8:26-39

I’m pleased to inform you that you just got to hear the. best. Bible reading.

I often declare if we had nothing of the Bible except for this part of Romans 8, it would still serve plenty.

For those wondering how or if I can justifiably call it the best Bible reading, it is demonstrably true.

You might think of something like “love your neighbor as yourself” as central. But there’s a reason it’s called the Golden Rule: because everybody believes it. It’s functionally a no-brainer. Do you really need the Bible to tell you to be nice to others? One of Jesus’ most famous parables, the Good Samaritan, was told to get over legalistic haggling about whether it includes neighbors on both sides of your house *and* also across the street, told so you’d consider neighbors in a less constrained way. Big deal. As I’ll continue to say, just telling you what you should be doing is of minimal value. You need to know what *God* is doing.

So for demonstrable validity of Romans being the best Bible reading, I’ll start by observing that we’re hearing from Romans for fourteen straight Sundays this year, all the way until mid-September. The most we would possibly hear from another book like this is eight sequential Sundays of 2nd Corinthians, seven for 1st Corinthians, and six of Hebrews. 14. The lectionary really likes Romans, and particularly this chapter.

This is our third Sunday through Romans 8. Three weeks for one chapter. There are few other chapters we hear all of: 1st Corinthians 13 on love, 1st Corinthians 1 on God’s wisdom (or foolishness) in the cross, Galatians 1 on the truth and freedom of the gospel. 1st Corinthians 15 on the resurrection of the body we might get to hear over four weeks. (Depending on the moon. Long story...) So potentially more, but it’s also not quite the whole chapter.

Plus, for resurrection hope, this reading today still has it beat, because we hear it at every funeral service, reiterating and reassuring at the end of the prayers, when the last trumpet of 1st Corinthians 15 only goes off at the occasional graveside committal service.

So, today in Romans 8, the heart of scripture, the gold nugget core kernel of our faith, the epitome of the promise for you: nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The best. All you need. Of course, it’s not really proven statistically but effectively, how it works and helps you and is meaningful to you.

To try it out, and since you’re used to hearing the promise, with most of my sermons boiling down to it (I hope), let’s going to leave Romans 8 and muddle through the parables instead.

Five little parables from Jesus with “divine brevity,” * bundled in this chunk. They all try to impart some vision of the kingdom of heaven, but each differs.

There’s loads of mystery to discover in these, similes without telling us why they’re similar. “The kingdom of heaven is like...” Well, *why* is it like that? At least when Forrest Gump tells us life is like a box of chocolates, we’re not left thinking life is like that because you have to take the lid off first, or because all the stuff you don’t want is leftover, or it’s easy around Valentine’s Day. It’s like a box of chocolates, Forrest said, because you never know what you’re going to get.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast for dough, like a big net... Why?

To start, let’s notice the kingdom of heaven is like something simple and inclusive. It’s like outdoors work and like inside work. It’s like white collar merchants and it’s laborers with dirty hands and overalls. It’s like regular everyday life, not only souped up tidy in fancy palaces (or maybe it’s *not* like the hoity-toity at all). It’s like masculine images, and also it’s like feminine.

Let’s pause to appreciate this great female image of God. (And I would say we’re best to keep God as the central character in these parables;

* Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, p99

again, that's when the Bible's helpful, in telling about God for us.) So God is like this woman baker. She's not making supper for her family; this is a crazy amount of flour. Three measures means 128 cups of flour. Eight gallons of flour. Once water is mixed in, something like 101 pounds of dough.** In my lazy bread machine, two cups of flour make a one-pound loaf. This lady had something like 64 loaves of bread coming.

The kingdom of heaven is like that. It's like that maybe for being simple, but extravagantly abundant. More than enough. Ready to feed a village.

Maybe it's like that because how sneaky the yeast is, finding its way through the flour to get it all doughy. Jesus rightly says it's hidden; you couldn't pull yeast back out of a recipe. Nor do you really get to see it work, even though the evidence of it is plainly visible in rising, expanding dough.

That rising might also highlight another oddity of what the kingdom is like. Rising may seem like resurrection, but risen bread or leavened bread is not the typical biblical image. We're more apt to think of yeast needing to be cleared out for Passover and avoided. It is usually seen as contaminating.

The kingdom of heaven is like this impurity that sneaks in and changes everything.

This is a good time to remember that "kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's language subverting the Roman Empire, of God against Rome, so this could be better translated for our ears as "godly empire." Jesus might be saying the godly empire impurely sneaks in to set about doing its work, totally changing the old empire.

One writer describes the Roman Empire saying everybody had their assigned place, but Jesus changes those places by including the outcast, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, reaching across any boundary of socioeconomic or political or religious status, even by raising the dead.*** Yeasty Jesus contaminated the old system, sneaking in and in small ways, making very sticky changes, making us rise up. And become what

we're supposed to be, of course. Because who really wanted a bowl full of dry chalky flour? We're supposed to be bread.

The invasion that changes the landscape fits with the mustard seed, too. You know if you've helped pull yellow rocket from our prairie or witnessed the dissemination of garlic mustard in our state that mustard spreads. Little tiny seeds invade, take over. Further, all the birds coming to nest in it might not be welcome in the middle of a field. Those birds hide in the shrub that wasn't wanted there to begin with and then eat up the seeds and plants that *had* been intended. The kingdom of heaven, the godly empire invites all kinds of unpleasant company to come hang out and join in. At which point you should say, "Thanks be to God, and I'm darn happy I'm one of them and have found a safe place to roost!"

If you're not sure that special mustard seed has sprouted shrub-ward to host you, then wait for the net. It's bound to sweep you away. Again, this is an amusing all-inclusive image from Jesus. We're apt to think the net is just catching fish, and it often is even mistranslated in this passage as if that's what Jesus said. But he was familiar with fishing and with nets. We might think of the by-catch of dolphins or endangered species (though let's remember that for Jesus, it's good to get caught in the net and is how you get brought to God and God's work).

I haven't fished with nets, but still with a scrawny lightweight line, I've not only pulled in fish, but the occasional turtle, literal boatloads of seaweed, most of my bobber collection are scavenged by snaring. This week would often be our youth-led Boundary Waters service, and up there I've hauled in fishing lures and parts of fishing poles and life jackets and soggy shoes, and scooped up a pocket knife I used for years afterward.

Jesus' net will catch at least that much, not only for the trophy keeper fish that you might wish you could be, but the odd found treasures that continue

** Capon, p100

*** Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, p291

to be celebrated, all surprisingly scooped up into his care.

Back to the lens of Romans. In the world you may be sighing and groaning. Indeed, if you're not you might not be paying attention. Because this isn't going how God wants, with the earthly empire and the old status quo, where your status is all too locked in and death seems to reign, and doing your best can't do much about it. Yet God is at work, for God's grander purposes.

The yeast has been set loose on the world. God the baker has done her simple but extravagantly abundant work. The seed is planted, sneaking in to offer safe nesting. The net is scooping up everything for Jesus. This is already happening, the godly empire changing the status quo, inalterably setting it toward God's ways. Life is rising.

No matter where you are, feeling like a bird without a home, dry flour in the mix, a scummy old boot in the bottom of the lake, you are caught up into the kingdom of heaven, into the work of Jesus, into God's care.

“Can anything separate [you] from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death? I am sure that nothing can separate [you] from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future. Nothing in all creation can separate [you] from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord!”