

**Devotions – August 27 – September 2, 2017**

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**Sunday, August 27, 2017**

Text: Matthew 13:44

**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**

In Matthew 13:44-48, Jesus gives many examples of what the kingdom of heaven is like. He compares it to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush. Or that it is like a little bit of yeast that has the capability of making dough rise and expand twice its size. Frankly, these metaphors or similes don't give me the sense of awe I believe Jesus was trying to convey in describing what the kingdom of God is like. So I came up with one of my own.

Last autumn, I had carefully transplanted my only two Jack-in-the-Pulpit plants from our front yard to the back yard. I have high regard for these plants. They are unusual, delicate, and precious. This spring they came up through the ground strong and healthy but much to my dismay their stems kept getting broken off by the chipmunks scampering all around them to get to the fallen sunflower seeds from the bird feeder. I did all I could do in trying to keep those plants alive. I'd prop them up with sticks and even tape the half broken stems with scotch tape (pathetic I know). Nothing worked and eventually they died. You wouldn't even know they existed. I was heartbroken.

A few weeks later, I'm doing my routine outdoor chores which include watering the garden. I grab the end of the hose in one hand and bend down to turn on the water faucet with the other. There among the thickness of other plants and weeds were two Jack-in-the-Pulpits. Imagine my surprise! I have no idea how their little seeds had traveled from one side of the house around to the other side to end up where I wouldn't miss seeing them.

What was once broken, dead, and gone sprouted life in an unexpected place. The kingdom of God, God's way of being and doing on this earth, will not only surprise you, but give you great joy.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, thank you for new life given to us through Christ. Often times we try to fix our brokenness while you continue to surprise us with your grace. Thank you for these wonderful reminders of your kingdom... your way of being and doing on this earth. Amen*



**Monday, August 28, 2017**

Text: Romans 5: 1-5

**Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,<sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**

I am reading a delightful book called *The Book of Joy* by Douglas Abrams. It is a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu during a week they spent together in Dharamsala, India. They are good friends who together looked back on their long lives to answer a single burning question: How do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering? In this book they traded intimate stories, teased each other continually, and shared their spiritual practices.

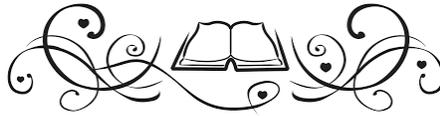
Desmond Tutu: "Anguish and sadness in many ways are things that you cannot control. They happen. But as you grow in the spiritual life, whether as a Buddhist or a Christian or any other tradition, you are able to accept anything that happens to you. You accept it not as the result of your being sinful, that you are blameworthy because of what has happened—it is part of the warp and woof of life. It's going to happen whether you like it or not. There are going to be frustrations in life. The question is not: How do I escape? It is: How can I use this as something positive?"

The Dalai Lama's response to Desmond: "There are different aspects to any event. For example, we lost our own country and became refugees, but that same experience gave us new opportunities to see more things. For me personally, I had more opportunities to meet with different people, different spiritual practitioners like you, and also scientists. This new opportunity arrived because I became a refugee. If I remained in the Potala in Lhasa, I would have stayed in what has often been described as a golden cage: the Lama, holy Dalai Lama. So, personally, I prefer the last five decades of refugee life. It's more useful, more opportunity to learn, to experience life. Therefore, if you look from one angle, you feel, oh how bad, how sad. But if you look from another angle at the same tragedy, that same event, you see that it gives new opportunities."

Adding to this dialogue the Apostle Paul says he knows that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

When we look back over the tragedies of our lives, and the sufferings we have endured, how they change us is a matter of perspective. We can be consumed with self-pity or be open to discover the opportunities God can create out of tragedy.

Let us pray: *Faithful God, open our hearts and minds to the endless opportunities your grace provides in all circumstances. You alone are God. You see and know what we can't see. Help us to see what you see. Amen*



**Tuesday, August 29, 2017**

Text: John 14: 1-6

**“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”**

This very well-known Bible passage is often read at funerals. We are assured of a place beyond this life where we will dwell with God. Thomas in this passage doesn't have this assurance because he doesn't have a clue what Jesus is talking about. His question reveals his uncertainty, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” There are times I ask this question myself when I am seeking the Lord's direction in certain situations.

My husband and I suffer from what we have labeled DDD – Direction Deficit Disorder. While it is not a pleasant handicap to have it certainly is an entertaining one. The obvious disadvantage is that since neither one of us is a competent navigator we get lost or turned around frequently. The advantage... we discover some amazing places we would have never known otherwise.

When seeking spiritual direction it would be nice to have a road map. It would be helpful if Jesus gave us precise directions. In a way he does. His response, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” It isn't a route Jesus points to. It is himself. God incarnate. The one who says, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” The one we put our trust in even if we struggle with Direction Deficit Disorder. The advantage to this relationship of trust? You will have some amazing discoveries you would have never known otherwise.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, we trust in who you are: the God who gives life and opens opportunities no matter where we turn. We look to you as we walk this life by faith, not by sight. Amen*



**Wednesday, August 30, 2017**

Text: Ephesians 4:22-24

**<sup>22</sup> You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**

Does this sound familiar to you? After your morning routine, you open the closet door, shuffle around the multiple clothes draped over hangers, and say, “What shall I wear today?” There seems to be many factors that come into play when making a decision. It could be the mood you are in - choosing something blue instead of yellow because you feel quiet. Or it’s a matter of comfortability. If you are in for a long day you might not care how vogue the garment is as long as it feels comfortable.

In the first centuries, when people were baptized, each one – fresh out of water- was clothed in a new or newly clean and bleached white robe: the alb. This garment was the basic garment of men and women of all classes in the ancient Mediterranean world. Washed and bleached clean, this garment became one of the basic symbols of baptism. It expressed the idea that to be baptized was to “put on Christ” and join that multitude of people who had “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). To walk in the baptismal way was to walk in the freedom and grace of such a robe. Even when the styles changed in the ancient world, this garment continued to be used in baptism.

Today, we see the alb worn by ministers, assisting ministers and worship leaders. This clothing is a sign of the baptismal identity we all share. It signifies baptism, and it belongs to us all. With that in mind, I have often wondered what it would be like if a whole set of albs, in diverse sizes, were available for each person to put on when they walked through the doors of the church. Imagine, yourself, along with everyone in your congregation wearing an alb. The same style for both men and women, remembering the baptismal assertion of Paul: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28). It is a visual I think we could all benefit from.

So... whether it is this morning or tomorrow morning, when you open the closet door wondering what you should put on, visualize a new or newly clean and bleached white robe. May it be a reminder to you throughout the day of being clothed in Christ, according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

*Let us pray: Gracious God, the most precious garment in our wardrobe is a fresh clean robe, the righteousness of Christ. Today, I put it on. In humility and gratitude I walk in the freedom and grace Christ has given me. Daily remind me to return to the waters of baptism where my old self has died and my new self is adorned in the likeness of God. Amen*

Excerpts taken from *The Sunday Assembly*  
By Brugh and Lathrop



**Thursday, August 31, 2017**

Text: Matthew 7:1-5

**“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.**

Judgment is one of the major obstacles that prevent us from loving others. It is also an obstacle to love ourselves as God wants us to.

We live in a hyper-opinionated culture. As a result of all these opinions, we have become hyper-judgmental. Matthew Kelly, from his book *Rediscover Jesus*, recommends this practical spiritual exercise: Count how many times throughout the day you judge something, someone, or yourself. I actually tried this one day. I didn’t attempt counting, but I did make an intentional effort to be aware of this. More often than not, I judged myself in unhealthy ways.

Just focusing on reducing the amount of judgment in our lives is a path to incredible spiritual growth along with improving the relationships we have with those around us.

Jesus’ teaching about judgment could change the world. As Gandhi said, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” Whenever you are tempted to judge someone, turn your attention to seeing that person as a child of God. The greatest commandment Jesus gives is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, by your Spirit, make me aware just before I am about to fall into judging someone. By your grace, remind me to stop. Amen*



**Friday, September 1, 2017**

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

We could easily read the Parable of the Sower as descriptions of various groups of people. As if there are certain people who are, well... just plain rocky soil. Some people have no depth. Then there are others who hang out with the thorns. Some happen to be good soil.

If types of soil are types of people then by making this distinction we've set ourselves up as a judge of others. But the truth of the matter is - all these soils reside within each and every one of us. And depending on the day, or the moment, or the circumstance, we end up presenting one or the other.

The thorns, the rocky ground, the hard beaten path -- these are obstacles, not people, to God's kingdom breaking into our lives. Barriers that prohibit the life of God's word to take root in our lives on any given day.

For me, today, it's striving too much. Striving to get "this" done, so I can get "that" done and when "that's" done, I can go on to the next project. What's that all about? Do I think the more I get done, the more brownie points I'll have to win God's favor? It appears I'm "working" on tilling the soil so it will be fertile. So it will be good enough.

Jesus does not use this parable to exhort hearers to "be good soil". He tells us this so we are aware of the many obstacles to God's word being active in our lives; barriers that we construct that hinder God's creative word to take root and grow.

The good news in this parable is - Jesus, the active seed of God's word, gives of himself generously, continuously, regardless of our rocks, thorns, and hardness. The sower keeps sowing extravagantly even in the least promising places. Jesus does not give up on us, but keeps working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny in and among us.

Let us pray: *I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen* (Ephesians 3:16-20)



**Saturday, September 2, 2017**

Text: Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

<sup>31</sup> **What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**

<sup>37</sup> **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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.**

This passage in Romans, written around 56-57 C.E., carries with it a sense of timelessness and constancy. God's love for us is always present throughout the ages in whatever situation we may find ourselves in. Hardships, distress, famine, fear, anxiety, illness, loss...they are not bigger than God's love for us, nor do they remain as constant in our lives as God's love does.

Years ago, I came across a poem by an anonymous author about a ball of yarn.

*A ball of yarn is full of intertwines, The core is a mesh of twists and folds,  
One thread overlapping another all around, Like how one path crosses many others,  
a twisting, winding labyrinth, But organized into a sphere.  
And when the sphere unravels, The paths untwist and untangle,  
And We realize, That the thread overlaps not another,  
But itself a hundred times over, A single, long thread remains,  
Encompassing all paths into one,  
Then we finally see,  
There remains a single thread, With one beginning and one end, Shared by all.*

Perhaps we see our life at its core a mesh of twists and folds, but God's love continually and constantly wraps around us and over us. It is the one single thread that holds our lives together; not only for ourselves but for others.

Like a ball of yarn, which is never ending, God's love for us is always present throughout the ages in whatever situation we may find ourselves in. Christ is the beginning and the end and the one thing that will always remain constant in our lives.

Let us pray: *Gracious and loving God, your love is everlasting. Since the beginning of time throughout the centuries your love has been and always will be steadfast. Remind us that through Christ's love we are all connected; sharing your path of life together. Amen*

