

**“Hidden in plain view” a sermon based on Romans 8:26-39 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 26 July 2020.**

COVID-19 shows how something small and invisible to the eye can grow rapidly and exponentially into a force that consumes our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, nations, and as a world.

In the 1930s, the doctor, teacher and minister in a small town called Kurow in the Waitaki Valley, noticed the poverty among local workers and talked with each other. They began the movement that led to New Zealand’s welfare system. In the late 1890s, just down the road from here, some women and the local minister noticed the appalling conditions in which women worked and so formed the Seamstresses Union that led to changes to those working conditions for our whole nation. At some point, some women gathered together and talked and planned, and so we have universal suffrage.

The five parables today show how the reign of God emerges from something almost invisible to the eye, how it grows cumulatively, offering sustenance. The parables show that this reign of God is a treasure worthy of all our attention and resources. The first two parables draw attention to remarkable growth arising from insignificant beginnings. Last week in the United States Congressman John J. Lewis died. I was part of a group of 20 international students who in 1983 he hosted for afternoon tea in his home in Atlanta. This remarkable man, at the age of 23 stood in the famous gathering in Washington and spoke before Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream” speech. This humble man planted seeds of justice and liberty and over his 80 years they grew and flourished. The best parts of our lives come from people who have planted seeds of life and love and hope with us and in our world. The second two parables point to discovering something of such great value that we are willing to sell all we have to possess it.

A common theme of all the parables is hiddenness. The sower hides seeds in the soil. The woman hides yeast in the flour. The treasure is hidden in a field. The pearl of great value is hidden among many others, and the pearl in a tough exterior. The net of fish is hidden under the surface of the sea. Now it might be thought that to see these things requires great skill or luck. But that is not so! What is hidden are actually objects that appear in plain view nearly every day. The great American preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says: “If we want to speak of heavenly things, Jesus seems to say, we may begin by speaking about earthly things, and if we want to describe what is beyond all words, we may begin with words we know, words such as: man, woman, field, seed, bird, air, yeast, bread; words such as: pearl, net, sea, fish, joy. These are the places to dig for the kingdom of heaven; these are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having.”

Where is the hidden reign of God in front of us?

- Watch children interact with adults, including in our congregation, their attentiveness in us and in what we do – it is said that children learn by looking sideways;
- I remember the enormous dignity with which a child carried a tray of bread down the aisle during a Communion service;
- I saw recently a person across the road outside a café bend down to someone who appeared to be homeless and talked with that person with respect and care;
- This week I noticed how a busy person went out of her way to check on someone’s wellbeing;
- I have seen how human beings care deeply for each other in times of struggle and illness;
- I remember how holy laughing connects people – I will never forget when I mistakenly said one Christmas Eve, instead of we will sing while sitting, that we will sin while sitting and 700 people spontaneously laughed;

- I have seen how one person can change a conversation from cynicism and criticism to an atmosphere of trust and hope.
- And how often have people come to us years after we were with them and spoken of something we said or did that helped them through, changing their lives.

There is another aspect worth noticing, the diverse socioeconomic settings in these parables: a sower of seed, a woman baking bread, a fortune seeker, a merchant looking for a pearl, a fisher with a net. In attending to the everydayness of our living, in all our diversity, we can see the reign of God. Notice, the reign of God is not revealed in an imperial force or a marching army or a grand announcement or startling edifice. We are invited to see signs of the reign of God in incredibly diverse settings and people. So cultivate the practice of seeing God's work among us: Build in ourselves the expectation we will see what is in front of us, and be ready to have our expectations overturned.

Now Jesus speaks elsewhere of what emerges from these small beginnings. The mustard seed becomes a shrub, sturdy enough to house the nests of birds. And Jesus says of those birds - "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." The yeast makes bread and bread feeds the multitudes, the five thousand, and, says Matthew, it was not just the men who were fed, but also the women and children (14:21; 15:38)—those who are often most vulnerable when food is scarce. And what happens when we discover the reign of God like treasure hidden in the field? Jesus says: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." And "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). The reign of God does not ignore our needs but does challenge our material excess acquired for self-serving purposes. From something small, the reign of God is spreading and its worth giving ourselves and all we have to that reign.

Paul says to the Church at Rome, we are "more than conquerors". We are called to be more than Stoics who endure and are eventually rewarded with relief. This is not pie in the sky when we die. Paul takes utterly seriously the powers of sin and death to kill creation. Paul says though that these powers will be dissolved into the glory of God, that there will be a time, when the spreading reign of God tips the balance, even episodically, and creation will be increasingly reconciled. And in the meantime God's fierce, compassionate love endures, and nothing in all creation can separate us from it. The reign of God, spreading, influencing, working away, hidden in plain view. Let's keep opening our eyes.

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