

“Staying Connected”

Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 26, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might endure in seeking your kingdom, even when it is hard to imagine. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

When we're going through a hard time, there can be a very fine line between words of assurance and hollow clichés that just make us more bitter. I will be the first to say that the passage we just heard from Romans 8 is very uneven. While I love the conviction at the end that nothing can separate us from the love of God, to say that “all things work together for good for those who love God” just feels like a lie when we see the sufferings of beloved family and friends and others who have done nothing but love their whole lives and yet are going through terrible pain. If “all things work together for good,” why did Paul bother to write about hardship and peril? There's also all that business about “God's elect” that just seems designed to encourage smugness. But I cherish the verse that assures that though “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Meanwhile, when our nation is failing to contain our portion of a global pandemic and simultaneously showing alarming signs of descending into violent authoritarianism, how does listening to Jesus spout off a list of cryptic metaphors for the kingdom of heaven help us? We might be most inspired to write our own lists of what the kingdom of heaven is NOT like. The kingdom of heaven is not like when people insist on doing whatever is most convenient for them, even if it puts other people's health at risk. The kingdom of

heaven is not like someone taking all three of the last bottles of disinfectant at the store. The kingdom of heaven is not like those crying out for justice being tear gassed and tossed in unmarked vans. The kingdom of heaven is not like those who need health care being delayed and denied from receiving it.

When life feels so overwhelmingly bad, it can be hard to hear the assurances and inspiration that live within our scriptures. This is why we join our hearts together as church, even and especially in these difficult times when we can't gather our bodies together in worship. This is why we turn to scripture together, whether it in this Sunday worship context or through the wonderful Bible Readings emails that Michael is so generously sharing with us twice a week. There is a lot going on right now that threatens to twist and deform our souls. We need to take extra care with our spiritual formation, turning to scripture even more often, to ensure that we stay connected to that love of God in Christ Jesus that Paul was writing about. Nothing may be able to separate us from that love, but if we neglect to pay attention to it, our spirits will suffer. If we can, together, sift through the scriptures to find what gives life, we can share those blessings with one another.

So what could it mean to proclaim that nothing can separate us from the love of God in these times that seem as far removed from the kingdom of heaven as anyone could ever imagine? Sometimes the greatest act of faithfulness we can manage is just to keep breathing, trusting that, indeed, the Spirit is joining in with us, offering up prayers on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. But in stronger moments, when we've had a chance

to catch our breath, maybe we can watch for the signs of the kingdom of heaven that are breaking through around us and name them for others to see.

What will they look like? What did Jesus say? A mustard seed that grows into a tree big enough to offer shelter to all the birds. The kingdom of heaven is at hand when hospitality is offered to all those in need, even and especially when it grew up from something seemingly small and insignificant. Yeast that got mixed into three measures of flour. The kingdom of heaven is emerging when transformative ideas or words or art take hold and change the very nature of our world. A hidden treasure or a pearl of great price. The kingdom of heaven is the new world that is possible when we're willing to sacrifice what came before to bring it into existence. A net full of fish, good and bad, that gets sorted out to provide maximum nourishment. The kingdom of heaven breaks through when we aren't afraid to name what is and is not of God, so that the people of God can be cared for with wisdom and compassion.

Exploring scripture together is not intended to merely bring us comfort. We turn to scripture to be equipped to live as followers of Jesus. We seek out these reminders of God's intentions for the world, so that we can more effectively dismantle what doesn't fit and build up that which promotes God's shalom. Where have you seen hospitality blossom from small beginnings? How have you seen transformation take root from invisible sources? When have you been motivated to make sacrifices in order to receive God's blessings? When we're feeling discouraged, reading that "all things work together for good" may feel like exactly the kind of pie-in-the-sky empty promises we're sick of

hearing. But we can help one another bear up if we can be God's love to one another through hardship and distress and peril. We can remind each other that we are not separated from God's love even though we are separated from one another's physical presence. And we can search the scriptures together for these hints about what to look for to see the kingdom of heaven emerging in our midst. We can find those hints and then we can proclaim those hints with our lives. We can offer the humble hospitality of the mustard bush. We can feed the yeast of invisible transformation by working on our own hearts that are so slow to change and grow. We can consider what sacrifices God is calling forth from us, of the things we've held dear that we must let go in order to embrace the new thing God is offering.

Hope is most effective when it's more than just a feeling. Hope is most powerful when it's both the motivation and the result of our actions. When our actions are guided by our understanding of the gospel, by the teachings of Jesus and the assurances that generations of Christians have found trustworthy, they are part of the kingdom of heaven emerging in our midst. They can transform our world because they have first transformed our hearts. We need each other to access this power that lives within our scriptures. We help one another to have the ears we need to hear. We need the new treasures we receive from others to fully appreciate the old treasures we were already holding. So as we continue through these not very heavenly times, let us re-commit ourselves to joining together to explore God's gift of scripture, so that we may follow Jesus in living out the good news of God's love! Hallelujah and Amen!