

8th Sunday After Pentecost – Lectionary 17

Sunday, July 26, 2020

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

I have a very bad memory; just ask my wife! Or my kids! Or my extended family! It's a wonder I can function in this world, sometimes, but I have been reminded – over and over again of the simple joy of “re-discovering” beautiful stories in the world, of re-noticing things that I have already witnessed.

But this can also be frustrating to myself and to others, for when I forget HOW I did something, I have to re-create the process, when I forget someone's name or a significant event in their life, it's like I have to start over...

As we establish norms and ways, things we take for granted, so that we can get more and more efficient. Then, we can move from not knowing to knowing, and then, on to “expertise.” And once we become an expert, we have little desire to look at the process with fresh eyes. Once we reach “expert” level, we want to level up even more. And we start to care less about the process, just that we **enforce** “the process.” We show less care about someone, because we don't let them **re-tell** their story to us, or we get so caught up in the way WE do worship or singing or “confirmation” that we fail to re-imagine...until something forces us to re-imagine

What is the effect? **We lose the gift of wonder.** Now, can you be an expert and still wonder? Yes! But that wonderment is quite often lost on us. We find a way, a path, and see that as THE ONLY WAY forward. We hear someone's story, and we don't let them update their story, or tell us of new beginnings in their life.

In about my 5th year as a pastor, I began a journey of intentional discipleship with colleagues across the US. In that journey, my eyes were opened to many things. Yes, I had learned from a seminary on how to read and interpret scripture, how to visit folks and do pastoral care

But much of what I was left with was how to **wonder** and to **seek** the Gospel in the **ordinary**. I got stuck in learning Greek and Hebrew, and wondered less what those words meant in my life, or in my community. I didn't wonder what my place was in God's Reign...in the Kingdom of Heaven

I could explain who Jesus was, but I had a hard time explaining who Jesus was TO ME. Now, I'm not just about preaching “ME and Jesus” for we are all parts of the one body of Christ, but each part of the body can discern how they fit...how they are gifted

We all began 2020 with great intentions, with seemingly great systems and events in place, and we were all significantly **sidetracked**. Where we normally sought Jesus – at worship in a building, or Bible or book Study, or a retreat shifted totally. Even service to our community looks different as cleaning standards and safety controls are more and more in place.

Church leaders turned to ONLINE worship and learning. We have been forced to seek God OUTSIDE of the Church Building – I know – go figure! That tends to be troublesome for us, since we are not used to finding what a work Jesus has done in us APART FROM THE ORGANIZED CHURCH.

Those discipleship groups I was part of early in my time as a pastor has allowed me to be shaped in such a way that I am **curious** as to what God is up to when things don't seem **ordinary**. I'm used to asking **more questions** and to be **more curious** how God might be working in a **NEW** way...

Jesus tells a crowd about the Kingdom of Heaven and – through parables – tells them what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

The Kingdom of Heaven wasn't necessarily a new concept to the world. People who followed God expected God to show up, but not in the way Jesus was telling them. They were used to seeing **God in the Temple**, in the reading and interpreting of the **Law**, and yet, God was starting to show up in **new ways**.

As I think about my own challenges in remembering things and turning that into a bit of a positive – in terms of seeing things **anew**, I think of Jesus telling these people that they are to **look at the Law in new ways**. A scribe – one who notes the interpretation of the Law – will take the old **and** the **NEW** and will move away from established interpretations and take a fresh look at what God was saying to God's people

So, too, I think in this time, Jesus – through the Holy Spirit – is beckoning us into a new understanding of what it means to be the Church.

One big question floating out there is this: How do we handle Confirmation? (Talk about something in need of REFORM!) Confirmation is not going to be the regular gathering, maybe it will via Zoom, but what about changing the paradigm for LEARNING, while keeping the same vision: Passing on the faith to our younger kin? What about Confirmation in the home? Challenging older family members in the household to learn alongside their younger kin.

Worship is different now, but how so? Are we re-creating the same worship service, just over Zoom? Or are we equipping our people to do worship in the home? Can that happen? How?

The changes we see may not seem helpful or useful in this time, but think about the Kingdom of Heaven, and where it shows up and what fruit comes from it.

The Kingdom of Heaven...Found in something the size of a mustard seed; found in a few ounces of yeast spread throughout pounds and pounds of flour; such a meager start, but with lasting effect.

Simply lighting a candle in the home for conversation or prayer. Sharing highs and lows with your family...

And the cost, well, the cost will be great. We will move from old ways of discovering God's grace and blaze new trails. Without singing in the congregation's building; without coffee or doughnuts in the fellowship hall; instead, we will learn new ways of doing worship around a coffee table and by singing along while the band or organist plays a tune as we cast worship to the living room television (or watch it in our pj's on our tablets and phones).

The new and the old, together, with a very wide net cast out there, so that all kinds of people come together.

The grace we receive from God allows us to gather people from all over to share their grief with one another; to be advocates for racial justice; to learn from one another across vast distances, even in the midst of a pandemic.

This kingdom of heaven stuff is surprising us all of the time that even in the midst of a pandemic, God is somehow still with us, still surprising us, still calling us to give so much of ourselves.

In this time, we still give to the Church, to the organizations hurting so much. Not only does my family give time and money to our congregational home and to the synod, but we were able to donate half of our registration fees to Lutheridge back over to Lutheridge, as they cancelled summer camp – and NONE of our 3 kids could attend...

And we feel the pain of yet another event postponed, as the ELCA Youth Gathering moves from summer 2021 to July 2022, and the challenges facing that organizational group, our youth and congregations across the ELCA, but I love their tagline with this change: NEW DATES. SAME BOUNDLESS GOD.

And on Wednesday, July 29th, I'll be one of over 70 folks making phone calls to ask former campers about their CAMP STORIES, and I will invite them to tune into Novus Way's campaign on social media on July 29. That evening, those people I call will have the opportunity to give to camp in a special appeal.

For camp is yet another thing that looks different in 2020. No campers on site for any of Novus Way's 4 sites: Lutheridge, Lutherock, Lutheranch, and Luther Springs. But God's grace still exists; God still wants us to be in community, and sharing stories helps us get there and calls us to respond with financial gifts.

So, as you live into this odd season of our history, may you make the most of small beginnings of God's Kingdom re-discovered – as with new eyes.

Maybe that is a new practice of reading the Bible on your own, or with loved ones. Maybe that is making a financial gift, when you couldn't before. Maybe that means walking around your neighborhood and praying for your neighbors.

May you embrace the cost of the Kingdom of Heaven as you bring forth the new with the old

May you be surprised time and time again about how God can do SO MUCH with our little acts of love and kindness and generosity.

May God stir in you the gifts of grace, and hope, and wonder this day.

AMEN!