

Pentecost VIII: The Kingdom of Heaven Is . . .
Romans 8:26-28 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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The acclaimed children's television show, Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, contains a show within the show, a magical place called the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe." In each episode of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, those visiting with Fred Rogers in his cheerful living room, with its closet of sweaters and chair on which he changes his shoes, also journey by trolley through a tunnel to another kingdom, complete with a castle, King Friday XIII, Queen Sara and Prince Tuesday. The Neighbor of Make-Believe is a fantasy place where rocking chairs can fly and cereal falls down like snow from the sky. It is designed as a safe space apart from the challenges of the "real" world, allowing King, Queen and Prince, and by extension the children who watch, to work through life's dilemmas via imaginary play.

When Jesus teaches his disciples about the power of his presence and the life-changing transformation to be wrought by cross and resurrection, he speaks frequently of the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. He says the kingdom of heaven is like a small mustard seed that grows into an abundant bush, or a measure of yeast that makes nourishing bread. The kingdom of heaven is like the beloved pearl hidden under your dresser or the treasure buried in a field so valuable you would spend your life-savings to obtain it. In another parts of the gospel Jesus speaks of the kingdom to be found in a lowly child, a banquet feast, or a landlord who generously pays all his workers. Taken together, kingdom embodies justice, mercy, abundance, and the unencumbered, all-embracing love of God. The kingdom is intimately connected to Jesus himself. When Jesus announces his presence, he says "the kingdom of heaven has come near." And I am realizing is how readily I place the kingdom of heaven in the same category as the Neighborhood of Make-Believe: a nice fantasy-like place, a friendly, loving, safe neighborhood, sometimes a holy, God-filled space, but always a temporary one, from which we have to return.

After all, what of the kingdom of heaven do we find in the headlines of today with its rising infection rates, soon-to-be-overwhelmed hospitals, increasing unemployment, adults isolated from one another and children longing to go out together to play. For how long have we proclaimed the kingdom of God is about justice for all, equity in schools and courthouses, an end to suffering, or silencing of voices or separation of people. And yet here we are, still far from the kingdom. For how long have we said the kingdom of heaven is about abundance . . .an abundance of love, food, resources, or laughter . . . and yet here we are awash in grief, hunger, witnesses to greed, cruelty, and what can feel like narrowing future. The kingdom of heaven is built upon a certain hope in God's unfailing love and indestructible life and yet here we are with creation in crisis, a nation in turmoil, a city whose divisions of neighborhoods, opportunities, and health seem solidified. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is not much more than a magical state of thinking rather than a place we can expect to inhabit one day.

Except.... Jesus speaks of the kingdom in concrete, commonly used images that suggest the kingdom is here among us, just as he is, awaiting our notice, inviting our attention. The kingdom is like an ordinary, tiny mustard seed that grows into bush large enough to provide a nesting place for bird. The kingdom of heaven is like a measure of yeast, designed to dissolve into the dough, spreading its power to rise throughout an ordinary loaf of bread. Neither mustard seeds nor yeast were viewed with esteem in Jesus's life time. Each were capable of being scorned or disregarded. Yet neither their undervalued nature nor their tiny beginnings stop their extraordinary growth. Listen, Jesus says, don't be dissuaded by the apparent futility of the small steps in God's direction. For the moments of sowing and kneading have a power all of their own.

So the Kingdom of Heaven may begin small. The kingdom can also be hidden. Just as one can't see the yeast working in the bread, the kingdom of heaven is tucked out of sight and yet at work in our world. A sower tills a field and finds a buried treasure; riches so valuable he sells everything in order to buy the field; knowing he has gotten the better deal. A merchant beholds the beauty of a pearl, the milky pink tear-drop, and goes in search of his own. When finding the pearl he likewise sells all his other possession in order to claim this treasure. Jesus speaks in material terms, but what if he meant the treasured relief of someone else carrying your burdens, the words "You are forgiven" laid out across that field, or the preciousness of awakening to the truth that you do not face today alone but accompanied by the power of the one who raises us from the dead. Whether one stumbles upon these truths or searches for them, the gift of living in such goodness is enough to cause one to clear out the bank account, close up shop and move to the property next door. It is treasure enough to re-orient your life.

This kingdom is not found by trading one world for another, escaping the pain, struggle, or heart-ache of this "real" world by taking the trolley to a make-believe one. The kingdom is found by being in Jesus' presence, taking the old stuff of our lives, the good and the bad, and watching God intermingle them into something good.

These days, I have been catching glimpses of the kingdom of heaven through submissions to what is called the "Metropolitan Diary" contained in Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. Each week the newspaper publishes a collection of experiences of life in the city, and reading about bike tips, museum visits, subway rides has demonstrated the ordinary, often overlooked or undervalued moments we are Christ to one another.

So the kingdom of heaven is like the woman stopped a traffic light on a busy intersection during Friday afternoon rush hour, who exits her car to help the young couple crossing the street with their last load of furniture, when the blanket on top catches the wheel of the dolly. They are stuck. The light is about to change. Let's lift together she says. Blanket is out, wheel is unstuck, a smile is exchanged and woman drives away.

Or the kingdom of heaven is like the man who sits on his stoop while you walk down the sidewalk toward him with your toddler screaming in the stroller, inconsolable at the indignity of being strapped in at the end of the day. You near his step, brace yourself for his scorn. He grins. "Maybe your son is just practicing to be in the opera."

Or the kingdom of heaven is like the coat clerk who takes your coat when you check it at the museum entrance. Careful with the top button, you say, it's hanging on with a thread. Later that evening, walking home, you realize the button is now sewn firmly back in place.¹

Or maybe the kingdom of heaven is like the bakery owner who responds to the young shopper, new to the city, not fully employed, when she says I can't afford that larger loaf" "No, young lady, never says that. You are rich in here." And exchanges her \$1.50 for a large loaf.²

Where have you seen the kingdom of heaven?

"Life, even at its most monotonous and backbreaking and heart-numbing has the kingdom buried in it," writes Frederick Buechner. "The kingdom is nothing less than loving God and being loved by God, he continues, which means trusting when you can think of 1,000 reasons not to, praying when you don't feel like it, watching out for the beauty and the sadness and gladness and the mystery of your own life and life around you."³

I see the kingdom in you, Grace Church, in your acts of kindness to one another, your wrestling toward justice, your speaking truth in love. I see the kingdom in your generosity, your forbearance with these long weeks of not seeing one another's faces. I see the kingdom in our trust that God is good, that we will persevere to the places of resurrection God has in store for us and this world. Even as the world groans in the labor pains of a new creation all around us, that the kingdom is here. Grant us, O God, eyes to see it, hearts to receive it, and hands ready to build your good, gracious world.

¹ "Metropolitan Diary" in *The New York Times*, Sunday June 6, 2020.

² "Metropolitan Diary" in *The New York Times*, Sunday July 19, 2020.

³ Buechner, Frederick, "The Church" in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 149-50.