

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
Sunday July 19, 2020 ~ 7th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Great & Small”

*Do something great today.
Be kind to one person.
Be loving to another soul.
Say thank you.
Little things are not tiny matters.*

~Hrishikesh Agnihotri

First Lesson: Romans 8:12-25 (NRSV)

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Second Lesson: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 (NRSV)

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

[And another:] “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.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” [Jesus asked them.]

They answered, “Yes.”

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

REFLECTION: “Great and Small”

Both of our readings for today talk about the same thing. Both of our readings consider what the end will be like, what the purpose is, what the final goal looks and feels like.

For Paul, the goal is freedom. A lifting of an oppressive and heavy sense of bondage. A dispelling of anxiety. A moving away from fear and futility. An end to suffering. For Paul, the whole of Creation is undergoing a metamorphosis. We are becoming children of God. A great revealing is about to occur which Creation eagerly awaits. All of Creation is groaning in labour. And yet, the joy of freedom and salvation and the realization of our certain hope is just around the corner.

There is something about Paul’s take on the future, and especially the deeply emotional way that he paints it – as a lifting of our suffering in the present -- that is deeply affecting, especially in these times. We are today a little like nurses and doctors ourselves, watching Creation giving birth to something new. This process is terrifying. Creation is groaning, and we are groaning with it. We know what we are afraid of: viruses, demagogues, China and Russia, climate change, economic collapse, systemic racism. And yet we hope. We hope that what is born out of this terrifying pregnancy and labour will be exactly what we need. We hope that redemption is just around the corner. We hope that the future will be glorious and joyful.

Sometimes we read Paul as if everything he writes is argument and apology. We forget that while Paul does tend to go to his head, he is a man with feelings. If we are to believe the legends, Paul writes Romans from a prison cell, amid his own suffering, awaiting execution.

And so, even though the wording sounds a little dry, as Paul ends this reading he is actually pointing out the deep psychological truth that when we encounter events that are clearly wrong in our lives, and recoil in revulsion from them, our hearts and minds leap forward, sensing what the comfort we need might be like, not worrying too much about the details, and then clinging fiercely to this hope. And for Paul, in his jail cell, this shadowy hope is freedom.

There is so much human truth in Paul’s conception of how hope arises for all of us, isn’t there? It is our own shadowy, glimmering hope – always before us – not always understood, that we work towards. Paul writes, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? We hope for what we do not see, and we wait for it with patience.”

This is certainly what we are doing today. We are waiting for a new Creation. We are waiting patiently. And, although we have no precise idea of what the hope we envision will look like, we have a dim understanding of what it will feel like. It will not feel like the way we are feeling now, living during this pandemic. Our certain hope, we are sure, will be good.

Jesus is talking about the same subject as Paul in our readings today. Jesus is talking about the end. He is talking about the goal. He is talking, as Paul is, about Creation. And, like Paul, he is talking about his deep-seated hope that something must give, and that Creation needs to change. Paul talks about this New Creation as adoption by “Abba, Father.” For Jesus, this new Creation is similar. For Jesus, this New Creation is The Kingdom of God.

A few weeks ago, you may remember that I talked a little about change. I talked a little bit about how in that first movement of understanding that something has to give, we often get the impulse to change, and buy the self-help book, or join the gym, or go to the political demonstration. In recognizing the thing we hate, we make the big decision to change.

And yet, we continue, as Paul admits – to do that very thing we hate.

Perhaps, this is because Paul thinks that Jesus is going to fix everything.

Certainly, Paul takes a large view of problems. His writing suggests that the great reversal we need will be immediate, grand, and impressive. Much of Paul's writing seems to anticipate the great day when Christ will return and set everything straight. Paul conceives of change on a grand, cosmic level.

Change *can* happen in this way. The changes that COVID-19 have brought about have been grand and cosmic, and immediate.

Jesus, however, seems to understand change a little differently. In our readings today, Jesus de-emphasises the great reversals, taking us from the great, big picture understanding of change, to a smaller concept of how change can occur. Jesus looks at the small picture. With Jesus, the Kingdom of God is important – but we do not get to it magically. We get to it by small steps. By small changes. By incremental, infinitesimal alterations of behaviour.

There is something true about this as well. If you have every tried to lose weight and keep it off, success starts with one small change that leads to another. One small change, changes a whole system, gets into our way of being, becomes a habit, and then, that habit slowly starts to change everything. You can't lose weight and become fit in a week. But you can make the small changes in a week that will change your body mass index in a year.

It is the small things that count, Jesus says: The mustard seed; the yeast; the treasure buried in a huge field; that one fine pearl; the fish swimming in the vast deep.

Jesus understands that the change we need to build the Kingdom of God, involves more than turning black to white, or water into wine. The change we need is systemic. If we want to lose weight for instance, there is a whole system that we have embraced and that has embraced us – how we eat, where we eat, what we eat, how we socialize, schedule our days, entertain, rest and work, and love -- that needs to be altered. Jesus understands that we are not going to change that whole system in the blink of an eye. Instead, we are going to have to bring about the great change we desire by taking one small incremental step at a time. Freedom is just around the corner, but the corner is not sharp, it meanders. To turn this corner, we will turn the steering wheel only slightly.

If we are to lose weight, for example, we are going to start with how we eat at home. If we live with others, we will discover that that small change will change the whole way of eating at home with our family. And, as that changes, how we eat out will change as well, and that might change who we eat out with and how often we do so. As we lose weight, a whole cultural system in which we may have been treated dismissively because we were large, may slowly start treating us differently. And that may make us think about ourselves differently. Old friends who got something out of us being large might slowly start to drift away. We might end up in new relationships. Our weight loss might help us feel more confident getting out and exercising and enjoying things we had done in our youth and that we had forgot that we loved to do. In two or three years our lives might become totally, and yet gradually, different.

A small bit of yeast in a whole lot of wheat changes everything. It takes a terrible blob of dough and makes it light, airy, and delicious. The mustard seed is tiny. But if it can establish itself, it grows large enough to support a whole ecosystem that was not there before it sprouted – birds nest in its branches. A single pearl, something that is truly valuable, can change everything. Even in the parable about the fish, so terrible in its insistence on the bad fish being destroyed and thrown into the fiery furnace, we see that it is a simple process – the initial, humble practise of fishing -- that leads to a whole systemic change.

Small things count.

To combat COVID-19, small things count. Masks count. Distancing counts. Seeing fewer people counts. Being alone more often counts.

To combat systemic racism, small things count. The things we say and post online count. Acts of empathy count. The courage to admit that we might be the problem counts. Individual acts of defiance that coalesce and become a movement count. The books we read and choose to educate ourselves count.

To combat the threat of economic catastrophe, small things count. The experts tell us that slow, consistent, incremental savings over a period of years is the best way to build the wealth that will sustain us.

To combat the demagogues around us, small things count. Votes count. Friendly conversations count. Soul-searching counts. Our small bodies present at demonstrations count.

To combat climate change, small things count. Recycling counts. Buying less junk counts. Driving and flying less counts. Growing our own vegetables counts. Buying locally produced food counts.

To combat the growing imperialism of Russia and China, small things count. Friendships with our allies count. Deepening our own relationships with Chinese and Russian friends counts. Trying to understand counts.

Jesus, more so than Paul, understands that everything is connected. Jesus understands that for the change that God intends – for the Kingdom of God to truly come to earth – the systems of the powers and principalities need to be dismantled. But this does not happen instantaneously.

Change can happen. But it happens slowly. And for real change to happen slowly, small things, more than ever – count.

As the writer of our Worship Focus reminds us:

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