

Sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2020 - "Good Trouble: God's Call through John Lewis"

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

These parables Jesus tells have lost a bit of their punch over the years, so it may be helpful to use images that are more familiar to us.

The kingdom of heaven is like someone who plants a stinging nettle seed in his garden. It grows until it's eight feet high. Some rejoice because they can use it for making tea and cheese and herbal remedies, but others get angry - it's an invasive species, a noxious weed, it leaves painful bumps.

The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who takes and hides a red sock with a load of white clothes and turns everything pink.

The kingdom of heaven is a treasure that's found by a thief who's gone digging around in someone else's field. The guy hits gold, hides it again and buys the field without disclosing what he's found.

The kingdom of heaven is like a used car salesman who's always on the lookout for that ultimate sweet ride. When he finds it, he sells the whole dealership just to be able to own that one car.

The kingdom of heaven is invasive, sneaky, subversive and surprising. We miss that when we hear Jesus' parables that have been tamed over the years. We've interpreted them to mean that great growth can come from small things and that the kingdom of heaven is a great treasure.

That's all true, but there is something more going on here.

When Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his garden, his hearers would have been shocked. In Jesus' day, a mustard seed was a weed a farmer would pull from his garden, not a seed he would intentionally plant. If a farmer let it grow in his field, it would take over everything. So, the kingdom of heaven is like a noxious, invasive weed that someone sowed in his field?

The parable about the woman baking bread is even more striking. Jesus isn't talking about nicely packaged, controlled yeast that we use now. He's talking about leaven - rotting, moldy bread that was mixed into flour. In Jesus' day, leaven was a sign of impurity, something that irreparably tainted bread. Leaven was mixed into flour to produce larger loaves for daily life; but unleavened bread was for the holy, the sacred, feasts. This woman was making enough bread for a feast. She had three measures of flour, equal to 144 cups today. So, she ruined a lot of good flour by adding leaven to it. Also, the Greek here doesn't say the woman mixed in the leaven - it says that she hid it.

So, the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who hides corrupting leaven in order to infect a huge amount of flour?

Jesus goes on to say that the kingdom of heaven is a great treasure - there we go, that sounds more like something we expect. However, the guy who finds it is not totally on the up and up. He roots around in someone else's field, finds treasure, hides it again and then rushes out to buy it before the seller knows what it's worth - fairly suspicious behavior. So, the kingdom of heaven is a treasure that someone claims using dubious means?

Then Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. In Jesus' day merchants were viewed with disdain - more like sketchy used car salesmen on late night TV than upstanding local business owners. Their motives and scruples were suspect. So, Jesus' listeners likely pictured a disreputable merchant sneaking around, trying to get his hand on fine pearls until finally he finds the one great pearl and then sells everything for it. The kingdom of heaven is like that?

Apparently, the kingdom of heaven is not what we expect. In popular imagination, heaven is a place we go after death. Before we get in, we have to go through a gatekeeper at the pearly gates. That couldn't be farther from how Jesus asks us to imagine heaven. He helps us to see that heaven is abundant life with God in which we experience peace, wholeness and well-being together with all of creation. Heaven is union with God which brings life and freedom and the flourishing of all that God has made. Heaven isn't somewhere we have to try to get into. Rather, Jesus works to get heaven into earth so that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Through Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is breaking into this world. Yet, our sin causes us to resist God's kingdom in all sorts of ways. We want abundance for us but not everyone because maybe there isn't enough to go around. We want peace, but those people make it impossible. We want well-being, but should they really have it - have they earned it? Strange as it seems, we often prefer the status quo and the pecking orders we create that keep some on top and others on the bottom. If we're lower down, we want to be able to climb and get what's ours. In so many ways, individually and collectively, we resist the coming of God's kingdom.

So, it is great news that Jesus isn't afraid to use unconventional ways of bringing the kingdom of heaven into our broken world. It's great news that God's kingdom is as invasive and prolific as mustard seed and stinging nettle. It spreads and grows and flourishes even when we'd prefer to yank it up. It's great news that God's kingdom is like a woman who hides a little bit of leaven so that the flour can feed many, many more people. Jesus isn't concerned that leaven might corrupt; he just wants God's kingdom to feed and nourish everyone. It is great news that the kingdom comes in surprising, even sneaky ways - like a thief digging in someone else's field or a merchant with a single-minded focus on a great pearl.

We need God to get through to us in ways we don't expect. And that is just what God does. God works in so many ways to get our attention, to call us to repentance, to break into our lives, to bring the kingdom for us and through us. God comes to us, to you, today in scripture and song, in words of conviction and promise to plant invasive seeds of good news, mix things up, and surprise.

And God calls us to join this disruptive, sneaky work. We're called to get in good trouble, necessary trouble, as Rep. John Lewis described it. John Lewis, the great civil rights leader who died last week, grew up thinking that heaven was about after we die. But, then he learned from Dr. King that, "We must not just be concerned about the pearly gates and the streets made out of milk and

honey, but we have to be concerned about the streets in Montgomery, Alabama ... We must do the work, and whatever we do it must be in keeping with the building of ... the Beloved Community, of what some of us may call the kingdom of God here on earth.”

Lewis always called the religious community to join this work. He said, “Today on some of the big issues, moral issues, [it] seems like we been so silent. Somehow, we need to find a way to reclaim our position as people of faith. We don’t need to sort of give up, or give out or in, or get lost in a sea of despair, become discouraged; we just need to get out there.” When I was growing up, Lewis said, “My mother and father and grandparents used to tell us, ‘Don’t get in trouble. Don’t get in the way.’ But during the ’60s, the religious community got in trouble. We got in the way. And it’s time again for the religious community to get in the way. To get in trouble. Good trouble, necessary trouble.”¹

We need to advocate and protest and hold leaders accountable and work to build the Beloved Community in which all know God’s well-being, wholeness, liberation and peace.

We can do this, beloved of God, because God is always working to get through to us. God comes to you today to work the kingdom in you. Because of that, you can join in God’s good trouble.

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