

Homily – The Kingdom of God Is In a Drop of Water

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July 30, 2023 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

The big news in our household this past week is that the new grapefruit tree was transplanted into a very large ceramic pot. The hope is that this will protect the tree for the next fifty years from the gophers and ground squirrels that infest our property. And, Jeff put fencing around the tree so that the deer would leave it alone. Once the tree is a bit bigger the fencing can come off. However, two morning ago, I still found a snail munching away on the backside of one of the leaves. How it got there is anyone's guess, but each morning I have been inspecting the tree for other snails, but I only found the one.

And, this past week, one of the things that Jeff and I finally got to help with our gardening is a soil moisture meter. It is hard to believe that we didn't have one already, but a soil moisture meter is a long metal probe with a meter on the end. You insert the end of the probe into the soil and the meter tells you how wet it is. Different plants like different amounts of water and a moisture meter helps ensure the right amount of water.

You may know this already but when a plant is having a problem most of the time it because of water. Either there is too much water or too little water. And part of the confusion is that the leaves of a plant may turn yellow because it needs more water or they turn yellow because it is getting too much water. Citrus trees like water, but they also like to have their roots system completely dry out between waterings. When a citrus tree is on a pot, even a very large one, it often stays too wet and fails to thrive. The moisture meter has kept me from overwatering the new grapefruit tree. Water may be the stuff of life but too much water is also a problem. I'll come back to water in a moment.

Now, this year on our Sunday mornings we have been working our way through the Gospel of Jesus according to Matthew. And over the last few weeks we have been reading some of the teachings or sayings of Jesus. In these readings, Jesus is teaching his disciples, and by extension us, how to live a good life. His teachings were relevant two thousand years ago, and they are relevant today. I expect that they will still be relevant ten thousand years from now. The teachings of Jesus are timeless. But they are also enigmatic, and often confusing. Jesus leaves room for mystery in his teachings. Often we just want a soul moisture meter to tell us if we are doing the right thing. However, while you and I may want black and white answers to many of life's questions, Jesus gives us gray answers. He gives us "maybe's." And, when Jesus teaches us about the ultimate reality that is the kingdom of God he uses similes and metaphors to invite ongoing reflection and journey.

This morning in our Gospel reading we heard six more sayings. With these teachings Jesus does not impose a single understanding of the kingdom of God, but showers us with a plethora of images. And, I think this is a good thing. We are each in different places on our spiritual journeys through life. We have different lived experiences. The same teaching of Jesus may mean different things to different people, and it may mean one thing to us in our forties and another thing in our sixties. Thus, the teachings of Jesus are flexible. And here is a core benefit to his timeless style of teaching.

As we get gray answers from Jesus it lead us away from certainty to humbleness. Healthy religion is always humble about its own holiness and knowledge. Healthy spirituality knows that it does not know. The true biblical notion of faith, which balances knowing with not knowing, this true biblical notion of faith is very rare these days. Instead many religious folks think faith is being certain all the time. However, faith is the exact opposite. Anyone who really knows also knows that they don't know at all. So the gray answers we get from the teachings of Jesus help us constantly remind ourselves that we don't know everything. The Buddhists call this stance "beginner's mind." Imagine how our politics and our churches would change if we had that kind of humility in our conversations. It just doesn't seem possible anymore. Even here at St. Barnabas, both politics and religion are filled with people clinging to certitudes on every side of every question. This makes civil and humane conversation largely impossible because there's no humility. There's no openness to mystery as being that which is always unfolding. And mystery is not that which is not understandable. Instead, mystery is that which is endlessly understandable, but the understanding is never rigid. The way Jesus teaches gives us guidance yesterday, today, and tomorrow, as the gray answers gently nudge us into humility of knowing. They lead us into the spiritual practice of unknowing.

The pure definition of unknowing is ignorant, unwitting, or uninformed. However, I want to use the state of unknowing to be a little different. For me the spiritual practice of unknowing is similar to the definition of faith that I shared earlier. Anyone who really knows also knows that they don't know at all. Humility comes from unknowing.

And nowhere is the posture of unknowing more true than our understanding of God. God is beyond our understanding. Our finite rational brains cannot grasp the infinite. Thus, even for those who seek, God often seems to be elusive. And perhaps it is because God is closer than we can objectively or outwardly see. The great treasure from today's Gospel reading may be God who is hidden at the center of our souls. And to unpack an understanding of this treasure that is beyond price I want to begin by looking at a single drop of water.

For a moment let's consider a drop of water as a metaphor for God's indwelling presence. Waterdrops in the atmosphere are created when water vapor condenses on tiny particles of dust, a particle which is smaller than a mustard seed or a grain of yeast. At the center of every waterdrop is a dust particle. Similarly, every soul is wrapped around a particle of God, but this particle, although small, is boundless since the infinite God isn't confined. God is found at your innermost center, and beyond.

And it is not just that God dwells inside you, but God is at the center of your spiritual makeup. God is an integral and enduring part of who you are. God is not added to you, but you are added to God. God is the foundation onto which your soul is built. And it is not just you, for everyone you meet is also a God-particle wrapped in a soul.

Teresa of Avila is a sixteenth century writer and mystic, and she describes the soul as a castle with a series of mansions through which we journey. She wrote that God's mansion "is the center of the soul itself." If we were to plunge into our innermost center, we would find God. The practice of contemplation or "centering" ourselves is, in essence, reconnecting with God as our center.

So how do we encounter God when God is found within at our core?

First, we must believe that our connection to God already exists. Our belief in connection creates connection from our side. Though the truth is we can never not be connected to God. As the saying goes, "bidden or unbidden, God is present." With every breath that we take and beyond, God is present with us and loving us.

Second, to find God at our center we must quiet our minds and peer inward with our heart's eyes, placing our consciousness at our innermost center as best we can. This inward gazing is like diving into a well, but the well is full of debris. When we encounter debris, we lay hold of it, bring it to the surface, and deal with it courageously. Otherwise, the debris of our lived lives will block our way. We find God by peeling away ourselves until we find the pearl of great value at our core.

Using another one of the similes from today's Gospel reading, God is the hidden treasure buried in the center of our souls, and we can find God when we tear away the onion-skin layers of self.

If we persevere in clearing this well of its clutter, we will discover that the water of this inner well, the water in which we're swimming, is God. We'll find ourselves floating in God, encompassed by love. In a wonderful reversal, soul is now wrapped in God. And from our innermost being will flow rivers of living water, with God's-self spilling out into our life and into the lives of those we touch. In some ways this inner

work to connect to God at our center is a type of soul moisture meter. And over time and with humility we will be able to read the gray answers we catch from this soul meter.

Whether a tree or a person, water is the foundation of life. And though in our humbleness we may never understand it, the God particle that is at the center of our being is also the foundation of life. It is the treasure beyond all understanding. Through our lives and beyond we must continue to unpack or unearth this treasure.

May God grant us each the spirit to think and do those things that will unpack this treasure that is within and may we help others do the same.