

Christ Church Episcopal, Whitefish Bay

9 Pentecost, July 30, 2023

1 Kings 3:5-12 , Ps 119; Rom 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-52

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Jim and I so enjoy camping! Ah, to awaken to the birds, to hike in the forest, to swim in lakes, to sit around a campfire; we enjoy it all. Last month, we camped at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore on Lake Superior. We arrived at our beautiful wooded campsite, settled into our camp chairs and listened to the songbirds. Actually, that's not what we did first. We pulled out our phones! Yep, that's what we did. And, eek: no service! We were disconnected from our family and friends: no email, texts, news, Google. It was quite a shock. We adjusted, but it felt strange to be unhooked in this digital age when we are always connected. On Friday, the New York Times reported on a study of how many relationships have been adversely affected by cell phone usage. Sociology professor and author of the new book "*Restless Devices*," Felicia Wu Song says many of us are in a state of "**permanent connectivity**." We have remarkable endurance to remain attuned to our devices, morning to night. Wu Song researches the social and cultural impact of digital practices. She says, "**technology has resulted in us having a new set of intertwined interdependent relationships.**" Wu Song examined her own relationships, and saw how technology changed how she was with others, and with God. She found she was becoming more connected with people she saw on zoom and neglecting her in-person friends; she found her quiet time with God had gotten shorter. She suggests not denying the impact technology has on our relationships, but rather to recognize its impact and adapt accordingly. Our devices can become a barrier between us and God.

Today's Epistle and Gospel speak to our connectivity to God. In the Gospel Jesus tells five parables of the kingdom of heaven. In fact, He mentions the kingdom of heaven over 30 times in Matthew's Gospel; it's important! In these parables, the kingdom is likened to *a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, a pearl, a net*. Mustard plants are common annual plants that, given the right environment, can grow taller than me! Yet, these large plants grow from tiny seeds; each Mustard plant can produce 1200 seeds! Jesus says later in Matthew's Gospel that "**if you have faith the size of a mustard seed...nothing will be impossible for you.**" (Matt 17:20-21). Faith is our accepting God's love; faith is not some complicated set of sophisticated beliefs, or something we earn. Faith is taking God's outstretched hand, and the connection is made. The two parables about the treasure hidden in the field and the fine pearls illustrate that our relationship with God is so precious that it is everything, the most important thing in our lives. Jesus uses these familiar things as illustrations; He could have said the kingdom is beyond our grasp, is incomprehensible, is inaccessible. Instead, I think He is trying to tell us the kingdom of heaven is all around us, and He is right here with us. Jesus said about Himself, "**The kingdom of heaven has come near,**" (Matt 4:17). We, while we are alive on this earth, can experience a taste of the kingdom of heaven. When we get to heaven, we will fully experience it's glory. Theologian Frederick Buechner said, "**The kingdom of heaven is what all of us hunger for...it is where we belong. It is home, and ...we are, all of us, homesick for it.**"

On our camping trip last week, we hiked a trail to Lake Michigan that led to a perfect beach. I was dressed in hiking clothes, but hey, the water called to me – so I plunged in fully clothed (yes,

I first took off my shoes and watch, and took my phone out of my pocket). The waves were rolling, and I laid back into the water. Over and over again I walked out into the deeper water and then flopped back and floated, letting the waves carry me into shore. I felt God in the water, waves, sky; I was worshipping. I felt like I was floating in the holy, in the kingdom; my connection with God was complete. You don't have to go out into Lake Michigan to experience it, for you can experience this deep connection with God during everyday moments, like when you observe someone's generosity or bite a garden-fresh ripe tomato. And what is our response to experiencing the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven? We pray.

This sounds lovely but truth be told we have many competing interests in our lives, and our focus can stray from God. We go through happy times **and** troubling times. As Bruce Springsteen sings, "**Hard times come and hard times go.**" It is difficult to pray in hard times, but at ALL times God is longs to connect with us. At one point in my life, when I worked as a government scientist, I found myself in a challenging work environment of conflict and mistrust. Most days when I entered work, it felt like a giant claw was pulling me away from my connection to God. It was a difficult time. I began to pray about it. I prayed a lot. Over time, I felt God's closeness and peace even in that challenging work environment.

When it is difficult for you to pray, wordless connection works. Sometimes you want to offer a great prayer but all you can muster is a sigh. St. Paul tells us those sighs can be the deepest prayer. In the Epistle, he said, "***The Spirit helps us in our weakness...God searches the heart.... intercedes with sighs too deep for words.***" If you feel disconnected from God or feel the signal is weak, know the Spirit is right there. God is always available with a fast network. Jesus came with no barriers between Him and us, no high bars to leap over, no fancy cell phone plans or cables are required. All you need is a heart that longs for more of Jesus and nothing can separate you from Him. In our Epistle, Paul asks, "***Who will separate us from the love of Christ?***" and then answers with this: "***neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***" Jesus will never be disconnected from us.

Yes, our lives are enmeshed with the digital world, but they are even more enmeshed with the divine. In the midst of your ordinary messy everyday life full of technology, God reaches out to you and longs for you to turn to Him. The greatest treasure you have is your permanent connectivity to God. There is no place where your spiritual phone doesn't have service. If God can transform the tiniest of things (like a mustard seed) and make it flourish abundantly, imagine what God can do with you. Amen.