

Proper 9  
8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

July 30, 2017

*O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace and help us to leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

***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.***

I have always enjoyed the story about the crusty old priest who retired after serving a parish for over 30 years.

During the reception, one of the parish leaders asked Fr. Ralph if he minded sharing some of the wisdom from his many years of faithful service.

Standing at the microphone, Fr. Ralph said that in thirty plus years of ministry he had learned two important truths.

The first was that God did indeed exist.

His parishioners all breathed a sigh of relief for a moment they had worried that all their squabbling and problems through the years had robbed Fr. Ralph of his faith in God.

They were glad to hear that this was a priest who still believed in God.

However soon the same parish leader said, “Well Father that’s great news to hear, but you said there were two basic truths; What’s the second?”

Without skipping a beat, Fr. Ralph said, “Yes, my brothers and sisters there is a God and the second truth is, I’m not him.

There is indeed something about daily parish ministry that over time, and many years gives you a good dose of humility.

But along with that humility, there is much for us to celebrate this morning, and I am confident that St. Martin's has a bright and wonderful future ahead sharing the cloak with those in need and leading others to Christ.

In my preaching through the years, I have tried to focus on the Gospel, the good news, about our Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, this morning, let's start with our gospel from St. Matthew and I want to make a few brief observations about our lesson and our relationship these past thirteen years.

In several short vivid parables, Jesus seeks to describe the kingdom of heaven. He compares it to a mustard seed, yeast used in flour, treasure that has been found, a fine pearl, and a net full of fish.

These short powerful images are meant to convey the abundant power of God's kingdom breaking into our world.

It might appear to be small like a mustard seed or the amount of yeast used in flour, but Jesus wants us to know that even smallest most insignificant thing has the potential, the possibility of transforming our world.

You may recall that when our Lord starts his public ministry, he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, His words are a good reminder of what should always be our mission, our focus, as a church

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus wants people to know that his mission to the world, this critical moment when God's kingdom is breaking into our world is good news for those that suffer and long for healing in their lives.

In short, Jesus is describing what his mission and *more importantly* what our mission as the Christian Church should be.

St. Martin's has and should always be a place that offers people hope.

This offer of hope is no doubt also inspired by our patron, St. Martin who shared his cloak with someone that was in need.

And woven throughout our church's 66-year history is our response to the need we saw around us in our community.

At various times this response has taken different forms and shapes, from the early days of Church's bazaar to our emergency assistance program, the budget helper shop on Dresden avenue, our present day Suthers' Center and to the recently reborn bazaar and fall festival in partnership with our school.

At each step along the way, we have been guided by the example of St. Martin, and better yet, the simple idea that the kingdom of heaven was something worth sharing, and something of great value to our community and our world.

While we don't always step back to look at what we have accomplished, I think one of the strengths of St. Martin's is the commitment that all of us have, to this great mission.

We see beyond these church walls and as your priest I have been inspired to see your faithfulness to the call of Christ to share the good news, to be Christ to those in need.

While I know that you will soon be entering an interim period and that with any change there is a certain amount of anxiety. After all we know how Episcopalians feel about change and that we all prefer the old lightbulb to the new one.

I would suggest that the core commitment of St. Martin's to proclaiming the God's kingdom is bigger than simply one rector or any priest.

Five of us have been here during this 66-year history and as you prepare to start a new chapter in the history of this church, I have little doubt that the lay leaders of St. Martin's and all the people in this wonderful parish will continue to be faithful to the good news they have been called to share.

In Jesus' parable, he talks about finding "the pearl of great value" while in one sense Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, we should not miss the fact that each of you in your own way are that pearl.

Each of us have strived to be faithful to the call to pick up the cross and follow Jesus.

This is not surprising, for as Christians we proclaim a faith that is incarnational. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. We embody in our own daily lives Christ's mission, Christ's kingdom to this world.

Christ works through each of us to bring about his purpose, often in small unassuming ways like a mustard seed or a little bit of yeast.

In the days, weeks, and months ahead, I implore you to never stop being that yeast or mustard seed when it comes to supporting our church. This church needs you, and often the smallest and seemingly most insignificant thing can be the most important.

When I said, my sermon would be brief, I wasn't just acknowledging that there is never enough time to say everything. But I also wished to celebrate the fact that our lives together have been in their own way a sermon that has been both spoken and unspoken.

You've given me the privilege to preach from this pulpit and to share my faith journey with you, *and your lives in turn have inspired my life as a priest and helped to bolster my own faith.*

Sometimes people think that preaching a sermon is a passive activity for the listener, but for me it is part of the spiritual dialogue that exists between a rector and church.

It is a holy conversation that we have together each week as our relationship deepens and you over time get to know people in your faith community.

Many of you sitting here this morning, will never know the full extent of your influence on my life as a priest.

But I will always be grateful to God for the time we had together and things that were accomplished for the glory of that kingdom and *you all have been for me that pearl of great value.*

Now it wouldn't be a Fr. John sermon, if I didn't end with a C. S. Lewis quote.

One thing that it has pained me to hear over time, is that some people would tell me that they didn't want to bother me about something important happening in their lives.

Maybe, it was an illness, a divorce, problems with kids, it could be any number of different things, but for whatever reason you may have felt I did not have the time.

*Let me reassure you that I always had the time.* As priests, we are called to serve our parishes as best we can and this inevitably comes with interruptions from our routine.

But over time, if we take God seriously we find that those times we spent with people that needed us, were the most fulfilling and meaningful times in our weeks.

C. S. Lewis put it this way, **“The truth is, of course, that what one regards as interruptions are precisely one's life.”**

**Thank you for all the interruptions of the past 13 years, it has enriched my life as a priest and I leave this morning, knowing that there are great things ahead for this wonderful parish, to God be the glory now and always.**

Amen.