

July 30, 2017
Susan Gascho-Cooke

Today's scripture in Romans has long been a favorite of mine. Whenever I am asked to quickly quote a favorite scripture, Romans 8:38-39 is at the top of the list.³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?³⁸ For I am convinced (there it is again!!) that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ 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. I have found it to be a passage that stands up to the hardest things I've experienced, & the hardest questions I've been asked as a pastor or chaplain--a passage that, ironically, finds itself into my prayers at times when no other words can rise to the surface from the depths of grief or doubt or unknowing.

These words that are a boat that has carried me across fears & anticipatory grief re: the unknowns of death; my own, or the deaths of my loved ones. These are words that I tell my daughters ... at night when we snuggle, and when darkness looms large for them, and separation from me, even one floor down, can seem so scary to them: These words are the necessary amendment to the constitution of: "You are known and loved by God" ... AND nothing and no one can separate you from that love.

Our girls are in Ohio this week, having Sugar & Paw-Paw Camp with their grandparents. It's been over a week now – & by the time I see them this week, it will have been the longest I've ever been away from them and I'm needing to remind myself once again of that conviction that Love cannot be broken by distance or absence. By necessity, you discover the elasticity of love and the heart when you are at a distance from those you love. Paul, whose take on the Gospel I sometimes struggle with, is at his most pastoral here in this section of Romans, speaking words that have comforted Christians for 1,000s of years: naming the times when we simply have no words to pray; and reminding us that the Spirit's presence can translate both our wordless groans to God and the responsive, ongoing love of God back to us.

I thank God for these words. I am convinced of them, too. One of the things I've noticed about this Romans passage, though, is that when I've tried to quote it to my girls, it comes across rather too abstractly. In Romans 8, Paul is quite specific about the things that can threaten to separate us from the love of God – in fact he goes into a rather detailed list, but the love itself he does not attempt to describe. Sometimes at night, when the girls say they're afraid of the dark or upset because I won't be there for bedtime, I say – "You know I have always loved you, and I'll always love you. Even when I'm away from you, my love is with you." "I know you love me," they'll say, "but I don't know how to remember what that love feels like when you're not here."

I have trouble remembering what love feels like, too, sometimes. So, I'd like to hop over to the Gospel text for today which is a few more parables, following on the parable of the Sower that Scott Sprunger preached on two weeks ago. These parables are about what the kingdom of heaven is like. They're very short little parables at the end of Matthew 13, in

which the kingdom of heaven is like: a mustard seed and leaven (which makes bread rise). I think there are some answers here for how to see Love in the world. For the early Christians to whom *Matthew* was written it was about learning to see Christ in the world when he was no longer present with them in person--learning to trust that the Love he embodied and preached was still very much there; how to remember it; and how to remember it; and how to recognize when you're in its presence.

The kingdom of heaven is a mustard seed that someone chose to sow in their field; in Luke it says, "garden." The interesting thing here is that we've just gotten done with two parables in which weeds are bemoaned, in contrast to "wheat" or "good seed." And here we have someone purposely putting mustard, which was essentially a weed seed into their garden. Apparently, it would have been obvious to readers that this was a shocking and dismaying thing to do – one never planted mustard in a garden, because it would take over. It was also considered contamination of sorts – mixing things that ought not to be mixed: creating an unholy diversity. But here the kingdom of heaven is compared to a mustard seed & Matthew says that the mustard will grow tall enough that all the birds of the air will shelter in it; tall trees with birds sheltered in them were common metaphors for powerful nations; so it was rather comical to say that the mustard seed would grow like a tall cedar; maybe, the kingdom of heaven shelters everyone by spreading low to the ground and spreading widely, rather than spreading up to the top of a domineering hardwood tree; or maybe it shelters everyone by becoming a giant shrub, which is also still a quite different visual to imagine than a grand hardwood tree. Maybe the kingdom of heaven is about having some humility about what's a weed, and what's a good seed.

Nancy Rockwell, one of my favorite lectionary bloggers, wrote that: Jesus wants us all to see there is positive fruitfulness in the messy field, and the bigger threat may be, not the weeds we are sure we see, but our making a hash of the whole thing by pulling out the wrong thing. Within this view is the idea that we may not know which are weeds, which is wheat. And part of this view is that we will certainly overkill if we begin to force a sorting before the right time. And surely this is true of America now, a nation grown riotously intermixed, in which some of us would pull the rest of us out if we could, and our disagreement is so strong that leaving everything in is the only advice that will work, perilous as it may seem. It just may be that, with time, a ripening will occur in our understanding of what is going on, and the harvest we reap may be very different than the purging of the field we now seek. This is a non-traditional understanding. And yet, it is also the deep wisdom that is at the heart of the earth and of the human world. The earth has survived by evolution, in which living things have developed capacities they did not formerly have, which have allowed them to survive among their predators and to find the prey (the work) they need to survive."

Maybe love is seen where the new and different is not feared, but planted and tolerated and tended in the garden. And maybe the safe future for us all, will be in what today's weeds grow up to be. The kingdom of heaven is also like leaven that a woman hides in flour. A few things about this parable: First, unlike most translations, leaven wasn't the same as yeast. Leaven in those days was apparently "made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold form[ed]. The bread rot[ted] and decay[ed], unlike modern yeast." This leavened bread was not sophisticated fare, and it might even

have been considered unclean. But here is a woman – also often considered “unclean” for her gender, getting this leaven, and hiding it into three measures of flour. Apparently this was a lot of flour – even to feed 100 people. Imagine the surprise of anyone who unknowingly used that flour, & would discover when it began to rise, that it had been leavened.

One of the best things I read in preparation for this sermon, was by a New Testament prof named Matt Skinner, who said simply this: “Preach like you know that somewhere the Holy Spirit is grinning. She is a woman striding through in the shadows with flour residue on her hands, twittering to herself, “They’ll never know what hit ’em.” I love that! The Holy Spirit as a flour-covered woman, sneaking leaven into our stores of flour. In the words of Bayard Rustin, (organizer of the March on Washington, where MLK delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech): “We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers. Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable. The only weapon we have is our bodies. And we need to tuck them in places so wheels don't turn.” This is the spirit of the sower of weeds, who gums up the garden, and the woman who pranks the flour with leaven – the kingdom of heaven is being enacted through such incidents of divine/angelic troublemaking, gumming up the works of the status quo. Love might be all around you when such troublemaking is goin’ on. Troublemaking that re-connects us to the playfulness of the Spirit; troublemaking that provokes us into jumping in and responding, rather than spectating or shuffling along. Troublemaking that provokes us to connect with one another.

I’ll tell you the story of one of my favorite books as a child. It’s called *Maggie and the Good-bye Gift*. Kids, I think you might get a kick out of this story. One day, Maggie and her brother Jack find out from their parents that they’re going to be moving. And not just down the street, but to a different town in a different state. So, they pack up all their things in boxes, and load it on to a big moving truck. Maggie’s parents and her brother, Jack, are so sad as they say goodbye to all their friends, and Maggie is worried, because the new town will be full of STRANGERS. As their family is sitting in their station wagon, getting ready to pull out of the driveway for the last time, a neighbor runs up to them with a gift. “Here!” she says, “a little something for your new house.” And Maggie and her family drive off. When they get to the new house, they unpack and unpack and unpack and put things away. And as Maggie walks through the new house, her parents and her brother seem so sad.

Just then she remembers the gift that their old neighbor had given them. Maybe that will cheer her family up! She finds the gift on the kitchen table – no one in the family is around, so Maggie opens it. Inside is a funny metal gadget. What could it be? She looks at the pictures on the box, which shows someone putting cans in the gadget. So, she reaches into a box and grabs a can of baked beans, and puts it into the gadget. It whirrs and beeps, and, “wow!” it opens the can. An electric can opener! Maggie is so excited she grabs another can, and opens it. And another and another and another. Before she knows it, her mother comes into the kitchen, to find Maggie and the can-opener surrounded by every open can they had moved. “Maggie!” Then her brother Jack, comes into the kitchen: “Wow, Maggie,” says Jack. “You’ve got enough stuff there to feed supper to everybody on both sides of the street.” And that of course is what they do. Maggie’s troublemaking

turns into a party, which turns all the strangers on their street into friends. When you can't remember the love you've had, and you can't see or feel any love around you – when all you see and feel is separation; from people, from hope, from God ... It might be time to look for the disruptions around you – the weeds in the garden, the floury footprints in the kitchen or to make some trouble yourself – open all the cans in your pantry and force yourself to invite all your neighbors over. Maybe, in the words of my husband, the kingdom of heaven isn't about wisdom, but about being “strategically foolish.”

I'll close with the words of Wendell Berry from his *Mad Farmer Liberation Front*:
So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it. Denounce the government and embrace the flag... As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection. For the love is never gone, my dear ones. The love is always around us, waiting to be recognized, waiting to be remembered, waiting to be enacted, waiting to be received, waiting to be joined. Amen.