

Tool Kit & Conference Assemblies
Matthew 13:31-32
“Seedlings and Signs”
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul
Feb. 22, 2020

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

Grace and peace to you from our ever surprising and present God. Amen.

Some of us remember these two verses from Matthew 13 as a popular teaching text when we were kids in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. We planted tiny seeds in paper cups. We watered them and watched them mysteriously grow. We learned in this way to look for God’s handiwork in the most ordinary of times and places.

Scholars think that Jesus may have been answering a probing question about his own authority and entrepreneurial ministry when he used such parables to teach the crowds. ***Who does he think he is? How can this Galilean’s ministry have anything to do with the mighty work of the God of heaven and earth? How can such itinerant preaching, going from one outpost to another – or how can healing one person at a time – be significant enough to mark the start of a brand-new age?***

Many of us feel that similar questions are being thrown at us these days. Not a week goes by that someone doesn’t forward to me another article about the decline of the church, uncertainty about the financial future of our ministries, or even the relevance of Christian faith in this century. Like you, I see the changing landscape for religious life in this country. Times have changed. Christian churches no longer enjoy a guaranteed place of privilege in our communities, large and small.

So, like most Christians from the first century until today, from time-to-time we all wonder if our work, our witness, makes any real difference. One of the great teaching theologians in this synod, Arland Hultgren, points out in his commentary on the parables that these compact teaching stories of Jesus speak a word of promise in just such times of uncertainty about the influence of our institutions or our efforts. For in a parable even the most smallest actions can have momentous importance. [Hultgren, ***The Parables of Jesus***, page 401]

For that reason, we are living in what I call ***parabolic times***. Like the earliest Christians, we have to depend upon God’s assurance — rather than the world’s acclaim or the church’s triumphalism — as the source of our confidence and commitment to our common work and witness. Did you notice that there is not a gaggle of reporters, here, to record the things we discuss today in our conference caucuses or later in the Toolkit workshops? But friends, something important happens when we are “church together”.

Five years ago, when I had been bishop for about a year, the synod hosted a series of listening sessions; five of them — up north; down south; in the city; in the suburbs. About 150 of you showed up as we studied scripture together, talked about our hopes, and named our worries. Do some of you remembering coming to those listening sessions?

Those gatherings were really helpful to me as a new bishop and I had hoped that what we heard in those listening sessions would lead to a pithy new mission statement for us as the Saint Paul Area Synod. We did learn a lot together that summer and what grew out of those listening sessions was really rich but even the tightest summary was way too long to be called a mission statement. And so we called it a *Statement of Purpose* and it is on the back of your worship handout.

At the heart of our purpose as a synod, as “church together”, is a confession that Christ is renewing the church today and calling us to three things:

- ***deeper faith in the living God;***
- ***wider engagement in God’s world;***
- ***and bolder trust in God’s work through us.***

Year by year since then, we have been working away as conferences and deans, as congregations and leaders, as the synod council and synod staff to make sure we stay focused on what is lifted up in that statement of purpose.

This year, I invite you to pay special attention to these two verses from Matthew 13 and to the matter of ***bolder trust in God’s work through us.*** Others may not see it. Many in the world around us are frankly disillusioned with the church. They are weary of endless talk without action and skeptical that the Christian community — with all our in-fighting with one another — can actually bring renewal or hope to an age as brittle as these times in which we are living.

I don’t know about you but I’ve learned that our critics are often right — in part. Those who are quick to point out the church’s demise can spur us to give better voice to the profound hope that has been planted in us. I look around this synod — especially when I look in a parabolic way — and I see so much that God is stirring up ***through us*** these days.

Up north, four churches get together weekly at ***Zion Lutheran in Chisago Lakes*** to serve an evening meal to hundreds of hungry seniors and harried families. It may look like spaghetti and meatballs on the dinner plates, but gaze around the room and a new, beloved community is coming into being. Down at ***St. Mark’s in Randolph***, one of our southern-most congregation, good luck finding a parking place on Wednesday nights when nearly a hundred community kids and parents gather at the church. It’s the biggest deal in town. Or over in Stillwater, at the eastern edge of this synod, stop by ***Trinity Lutheran*** on the days they are offering warm shelter to homeless families. God’s doing something there. Or just north of here on Snelling Avenue, across from the new stadium, on your way home take a look at the brick church building where ***Bethlehem and House of Mercy*** both meet. There are construction cranes out front and soon a new condo building will block the view, but I’ll tell you, the Lutherans, there, are finding a way to bring long-time neighbors — some of them homeless — together with the new residents in those fancy towers; right in the heart of this city.

And I know there are a hundred more stories that I have not named today. Will you do this for me? Take a photo and write a 100-word caption about how bold trust in God is leading your congregation into new ventures. And send it to me. We will share all of those stories. Each one is its own parable of what happens when we have bolder trust in God's work through us.

There is so much hate in our world today. Fear of strangers and immigrants is at a fevered pitch. And yet "the One we do not know" is in our midst. (John 1:26) Jesus is his name. He is here — coaxing us to trust more boldly that God has already prepared us well to be signs of hope for others; bearers of a courageous word of reconciliation; and unrelenting messengers of good news for those with the least power — including our endangered cosmos.

"... It is the smallest of seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Mt 13:32)
Friends, the world aches for our witness — our bolder trust — that God is at work through us.

Like John Ylvisaker's *Borning Cry* hymn, when others tell us that the church is washed up and over, our God has just one more surprise. The Church of Jesus Christ is not over, done, nor irrelevant when it comes to God's purposes; God's plans.

May our hearts be open. And may we watch together for seedlings and for signs. Thanks be to God. AMEN