

Sermon, July 30, 2017 Proper 12A, Trinity Church, Collinsville (Canton) CT
The Reverend Lois Keen
Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“Grant me, most dear and loving Jesus, to rest in you above all created things... above all things visible and invisible; and above everything that is not yourself, O my God. Amen.”
(Thomas à Kempis)

I'm not fond of King Solomon. Today's reading praises his humility in asking for wisdom instead of riches, and God gives him his wish. However, Solomon was not wise. He became a typical tyrannical ruler of his time, rich in wealth and hundreds of wives and concubines, and he enslaved his people, Israel, for his massive, self-centered building projects. When he died, the kingdom split in two because of his lack of wisdom.

So, instead, today I tell you the story of Jacob and Rachel, from the alternate reading in Genesis. Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham, and Jacob loved Rachel. For him, she was heaven. He was willing to give up seven years of his life in hard labor under Rachel's father, Laban, to win her hand in marriage. And when his time was paid, and he went into the tent to claim his bride, he woke up to her sister Leah instead. Poor Leah. Jacob was furious, and that must have been hell for Leah.

Laban explained that the elder sister had to be married first, and since no one else wanted Leah, it had to be Jacob, but because they were allowed to have more than one wife, if Jacob would just give Leah the required seven days of heaven with her husband, on the eighth day Jacob could marry Rachel and they could live happily ever after – in exchange for another seven years of hard labor among Laban's flocks of sheep and goats.

And Jacob was willing to give anything for Rachel, even one week with Leah. So he did, and Rachel was his, and he was Laban's for seven more years.

Of course, Leah was Jacob's as well, and he did his duty, but she did not have his love. She did have, however, her own little bit of heaven each time she had a baby. That was something. And she was willing to put up with being an afterthought for the consolation that was motherhood.

Last Monday the Church commemorated Saint Thomas à Kempis, the writer of the small, yet great, classic of spiritual literature, *The Imitation of Christ*. It is the second most read book in the world, second only to The Bible. Here are some quotes from Thomas, which you might recognize:

"Without the Way, there is no going. Without the Truth, there is no knowing. Without the Life, there is no living."

"At the Day of Judgment we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done."

"For man proposes, but God disposes" Now that is wisdom!

The prayer with which I began is part of a prayer written by Thomas. And our hymn 448, “O love, how deep, how broad, how high” was written in Latin by Thomas, translated by Benjamin Webb, who gets the credit for it in *The Hymnal 1982*.

“O love, how deep, how broad, how high,
beyond all thought and fantasy,
that God, the son of God, should take
our mortal form for mortals’ sake!”

It is this deep, broad, high, beyond all thought and fantasy love that the images of heaven in the parables in today’s gospel portray. From a love as tiny as a mustard seed, an edifice of love ten feet tall can grow in our hearts. Three measures of flour can be quickened by love as small as a portion of yeast until it grows to encompass the whole of the world, much greater than its original portion of love. The Love that is God in Jesus is hidden in our lives and among everything and everyone around us, and God, the Son of God, took our mortal form to possess all creation for the sake of that Love. Indeed, you and I and our puny portion of love in comparison to these, are the pearl of great price, for which Jesus lived, taught, died, and rose again in order that we should know our true value in the eyes of the Spirit. Because of the faith inherent in these parables, Thomas à Kempis is able to encourage his readers to put all our hope and trust and love in God alone, for even the soul whose love is as tiny as that of a newborn baby, as tiny as a mustard seed, is as valuable as the best of all the fish in the sea. Everything else that is not of love will fall away from us at the end of our time here on earth. All that will be left is Love. That’s how big God’s love is.

So far as Thomas and Jesus are concerned, the Love of God for us all, what we call the reign or kingdom of God, is far more expansive than anything we can imagine. And it is more inclusive than we may even want. Yet there it is. We and our ideas seem big to us, but they are really quite small in comparison to the reality that is the mind of God. Even the universe is small by comparison with the mind of the God of Love.

The truth about the realm of God is that it is eternal and everywhere all the time, even now. And at the same time, our lives are not heavenly all the time. Our lives are a mixture of good and bad, heaven and not heaven, joyful and sorrowful, and all kinds of mixtures of thoughts, feelings, and experiences, including little bits of heaven thrown in from time to time.

And during those not-so-heavenly times we often turn to prayer. And, most of the time, it’s the difficult parts of life that bring us to our knees in prayer, asking God to help us, to save us, to give us an answer to the age old question, “Why?”. As though our troubles, tiny as they are in comparison to the entire universe, were more important than anything else. And, to the Spirit, they *are* important, no matter how small, because they bring us to our knees in the first place, where we are at the disposal of God’s Spirit to pray through us.

For "...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes ... according to the will of God."

And so, everything for which we each pray becomes grist to the Spirit's mill, and can be transformed by the Spirit to conform to the will of God, which is the reconciliation of all people to God, Creation, and one another. If we will not put ourselves, our souls, and bodies, at the disposal of God except when we are in extremis, then the Spirit waits patiently until we do call upon God, and the Spirit, as only She can do, multiplies the tininess of our prayers to encompass the needs of all creation. Imagine that: every time we pray, you and I, the Spirit is taking that prayer and growing it to the size of the mustard tree or the gigantic ball of dough. The prayer is hidden, like a tiny bit of sand in us, until the Spirit, bidden by us, sees it and uses it as the pearl of great price that it truly is, for the sake of ourselves, and those for whom we pray, and far more, spreading throughout the universe on the Spirit's wings.

That is what the kingdom of heaven, the eternal reign of God's Love, is. And it is worth laboring for, and praying for, as long as it takes.