

Love's dynamic energy

*A sermon preached by Canon Rick Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati
July 27, 2008.*

I will never forget sitting in the Cathedral in Boston, when I was a priest in the Diocese of Massachusetts, and hearing Bishop Coadjutor Tom Shaw read this morning's scripture from the eighth chapter of Romans. All the clergy of the Diocese were gathered in emergency session. Our Bishop, David Johnson, had just committed suicide.

My pastor, leader and friend was dead. We were in shock. Emotions and misunderstandings were high. I was separated from my Bishop forever. What to say? What to pray? It was a unique and tragic moment in the life of our Diocese, and in my life as a priest.

These words from Romans were exactly what my heart needed to hear. They are written for comfort and assurance in time of crisis, doubt and loss. The New Zealand Prayer Book includes them in the liturgy at the time of death. *"Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The ultimate value of this primary relationship each of us has with Christ is the basis of the strength and quality of our Christian community. We have wonderful programs and activities within and without the walls of the Cathedral, but in the end, only to the extent each of us discovers how much God loves us, and is able to accept this reality, do we become the kingdom. It is the Spirit's indomitable power to keep us connected to our true source, and then to one another.

The challenge the Anglican Communion faces as witnessed at the current Lambeth deliberations, is no different than challenges we face as we try to work together as a community of faith in this Cathedral, seeking God's vision for this place, and building the kingdom Jesus was teaching about in today's Gospel.

Jesus taught about growth, leaven, and ultimate value in our lives.

Some say, "kingdom of heaven;" some say "reign of God," avoiding the masculine reference "king." Certainly we can agree that Jesus was not intending to be exclusive of any gender in his teaching. I admit that saying "reign" feels awkward for me, since it still implies the exercise of political domination. I think we're talking about time and quality of life when God is in control. It is God-centric living.

Is the kingdom of heaven a futuristic concept? Many Christian sects believe that Jesus was teaching about a future time when life as we know it will be over and a new theocratic society will be in place --- Nirvana, perhaps. It is a reward that awaits Christians who live

right and accumulate enough points to qualify for the gold.

But elsewhere, Jesus teaches that the kingdom or reign has already come, that it is already here among us. "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.*" Apart from timing, it appears that this experience of life in the Spirit is characterized by dynamic growth, by proliferation, and behavior that reflects ultimate life-changing values.

The first parable we heard today, and perhaps most famous, likens spiritual life to the natural world. At this season of vigorous plant growth, if you are a farmer, a horticulturist or a gardener, you will understand exactly what he was talking about.

A **mustard seed**, the smallest of seeds, when planted, *grows to become* the largest of shrubs.

"The beginnings of God's kingdom may be small, but it has an inherent nature that will grow to its intended end, startlingly different in size from its beginning." (NRSV Footnote)

In a cross-reference from this parable to Mark's gospel, chapter 4 is added several verses about the seed growing secretly:

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. (Mk. 4.26-28)

"The growth of God's kingdom in the world is beyond human understanding or control. Yet people may recognize its progress and play a part in it." (NRSV Footnote)

Hebrew prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel used the metaphor of a tree's growth to describe the dynamic nature of nations, both good and bad. Everyone is familiar with the simple, symmetrical beauty and strength of the tree of life symbol, common in Shaker art and in other traditions as well. The Book of Revelations, chapter 22, uses a variation of this symbol:

*"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as Crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the **tree of life** with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22.1-2)*

If you have followed the postings about my wife Amy's healing on the Care Pages web site, you will know that I am a great believer in the use of visualization as a prayer form, particularly for healing prayer. I have a homework assignment for you this week. Find a

tree. Imagine it to be a "tree of life," which it is, and pick a leaf, any leaf. As you pick the leaf, reverently thank the tree for the gift of life and for allowing you to share its growth. Press the leaf in your Bible, at Rev. Chapter 22.

Each day, open your Bible and hold the leaf in your hand, as you visualize and imagine one peaceful, loving gesture between yourself someone with whom you may experience some conflict or negative feeling. Pray, "The peace of God be with you, my sister, or brother."

Then choose a person or group here in this city who is suffering from violence or injustice. Perhaps it is a child trying to survive in Over the Rhine. Perhaps it is a prisoner at the jail just up the street. Perhaps it is a resident of the Anna Louise Inn, in the Off-the-Street program, trying to stay clean and sober. Pray, "The peace of God be with you, my sister."

And then choose a person in a war-engulfed nation of the world. As you hold the leaf, visualize that foreign person, surrounded by the symbol of the tree of life, and again pray, "God's peace be with you, my brother." These prayers are for healing and reconciliation within your own life, within the lives of people in this city, and within the nations of the world. You may feel as small and insignificant as a tiny mustard seed, but plant your prayer and let the Spirit do the growing. Become an active participant in the reign of God here and now.

In the second parable, *yeast* is mixed into several measures of flour and eventually leavens the whole lot. "God's rule, like yeast working in a hidden way, will pervade one's life, giving it a new quality." (NRSV footnote)

I remember growing up on the farm in Freedom, Maine with four generations living under one roof for some of the time. My bedroom was on the second floor in the front corner of the rambling old farmhouse. At that point in time, my grandparents lived on the second floor, and the Saturday morning ritual for most of my grandmother's life was to do baking. Talk about yeast pervading one's life! Fairly early, she would pull a long black oblong baking pan filled with several dozen yeast rolls out of the oven of her woodstove. Those rolls were a sight to behold! They glistened with a golden glow as she would brush the light brown tops with salty yellow homemade butter. The sweet, yeasty aroma preceded her as she made her way down the hallway, knocked on my door and whispered, "Myrick, the rolls are out." My early adolescent life was given a new quality by those yeast rolls.

I also remember a time at a young age when I tried my hand at baking yeast bread. I remember being impatient that I couldn't bake it immediately after mixing the ingredients. I had hurried my way through the recipe, and evidently had vastly overestimated the amount of yeast needed. I left my pans to rise, nearly full of dough, covered with a dish

towel on the end of the wood stove, which was quite warm. After becoming distracted by some play activity for a time, I remembered the dough. I found that sticky mass draped down over the end of the stove, and splattered onto the floor below. Is this an image of our community?

Yeast changed the size, consistency, appearance, and location of the dough. The Spirit is at work like yeast in our lives. Perhaps Bp. Gene Robinson is yeast in the Anglican Communion. Certain people through the gifts God has given them affect nearly everyone whose lives they touch. It is like a person in a crowd who has an infectious laugh. It isn't long before everyone is laughing, even without knowledge of the original joke. Guests in our Cathedral several weeks a year through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, dinner guests every Tuesday night in the undercroft, and Summer in the City youth are like yeast for our congregation. Each brings a "Jesus presence" that inevitably changes how we think and feel and act as a community of faith in God's reign. Love and loving acts are infectious.

Treasure hidden in a field is found, hidden, and then redeemed by selling everything and buying the field. A pearl of great value is found by a merchant, who sold all that he had to buy it.

Have you ever wanted or needed anything so desperately that you sold everything you owned in order to get it? What do you treasure above all else in your life? This parable asks us to what extent we will go to follow Jesus, the pearl of great price. Is anything in your life more precious than your faith --- your relationship with Jesus? The kingdom is found where life is lived from the heart. Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also.

Jesus taught them in parables about growth, leaven and ultimate value.

"Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables? He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.... Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears for they hear." (13.10-11a, 16)

Amen.