

## *A Discerning Mind*

*1 Kings 3: 5-12; Matt 13: 31-33, 44-52*

Anne Lamott has a way of weaving meaning into the smallest of tales. In *Hallelujah Anyway*, she retells a story she heard from a friend. Her friend recounts how, in Malawi, the “men in the villages ‘stand back’ unto death.” (Lamott 49) The men step back and let the women and children of the village, who need it, have the few antiretroviral medications available. The men believe the children should have a chance to survive. Not only should they have a chance to survive, they should not have to do so without their mothers. To Lamott, this is a merciful determination the men make. They make the unselfish decision to do what they feel is right rather than save themselves. Making merciful determinations, Lamott concludes, is what we are called to. She says, “We can be those men. We were [once]. Most young children are.” (Lamott 49)

Solomon says, “My God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” (1 Kings 3:7) Technically, the Hebrew for “little child” could also be translated as “insignificant servant”. But, let’s not go down that road just yet.

There is something holy and precious in invoking the image of a child. Young children have an ability to hone in on fairness and equity in a way that adults often hide from with hyperbole and self-soothing speech. We could ask ourselves if Solomon, himself, is using a figure of speech here. He is no child. He is not even new or inexperienced at his job. He has been serving as a regent in his father’s royal court for some time. He has been groomed and trained to lead the kingdom.

In this encounter with God, Solomon does not come from a place of accomplishment or self-importance over his stature. He is accurately representing who he is in comparison to God. Solomon approaches his conversation with God with humility. He knows he is not leading *his* people; he is leading *God’s* people. The people in his care do not belong to him. They are not pawns on a chessboard, or possessions to be used, traded or extracted from. They are the beloved people of God whom he is supposed to protect and serve.

Protecting and serving is hard. Leading one’s community is difficult work. Our human nature consistently wants to make it easy work. We love when things are easy. We love when complex things are erased for quick and easy answers. Just pass this law. Just close that border. Just stop giving people handouts and medical care, then they will get their own houses in order. Then, the budget will miraculously be balanced. Out of a free-falling depression we will be. Such “leadership” makes the people nothing more than a number, nothing more than a commodity to be bought, sold, or traded at the government’s whim.

Solomon recognizes that the task before him will be difficult. When he meets his God, he could have asked for the things our very humanness would cry out for. He could have asked for complete and total control. He could have asked for a special military unit that would quell all resistance to his rule. He could have asked for the destruction of his enemies, the ones he has made up special names for.

Solomon asks God for the ability to discern good from bad. He asks for the capacity to discern right from wrong. He asks for wisdom in knowing what it is he should be doing in the world. This is what each and every person of God should be doing. This is, especially, true for those who have the power and authority to affect the lives of others.

Our task as the people of God is to seek out and bring forth the kingdom of God. This, in and of itself, is not an easy task. Jesus tells us in parable after parable this morning the kingdom of heaven is right before our eyes and we cannot perceive it. A man stumbles across it in a field, and hides it again. The merchant sells all he has in order to obtain one pearl; we do not get to find out what happened to his mercantile. How will his livelihood continue when he has nothing but this great pearl to sell? The pearl he would never want to part with. Jesus tells us that we will find it when we least expect it. It will catch us unaware and unprepared.

The woman with the yeast doesn't really combine the yeast with flour in the way avid Covid-era bakers are doing. The Greek says she hid, concealed, placed it inside the flour. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast hidden in the flour, working behind the scenes to make the bread come alive. When we touch the kingdom of heaven here on Earth, it comes in wonder and astonishment. It upends everything we were doing just a moment before.

It sounds a lot like joy. We can do the work of cultivating joy, but when it comes, it usually flows in seemingly from out of nowhere. The experience of the kingdom of heaven is electrifying, life-giving, and in-breaking.

It comes when we least expect it. Like, hearing about a backwater village in Malawi, rural and forgotten by those in the halls of the capital. It is a backcountry village where men knowingly choose death so others might live. Mercy, justice and sacrifice are hallmarks of the kingdom. It is what changes a kin-g-dom, an earthly reign of power asserted through force, into a kin-dom, the reign of God brought to fruition through the recognition of our interconnected human family.

The kin-dom is hidden, but we can find it if we open ourselves to experiencing it. In last Sunday's Boston Globe, there was a section entitled "The Future of Food". Something, that on the surface, seems antithetical to health and right living immediately jumped out at me. Researchers are using bacteria to produce a biodegradable plastic-like material. The bacteria go even one step further. They gobble up methane to produce the plastic-like polymer which "can be made into a variety of products, from grocery bags to food packaging." (Brouillette K5) Unlike compostable plastics, which require special industrial and hazardous composting, this polymer can be composted at home. It could be a revolutionary change in how we manufacture packaging for produce and groceries. Our beautiful, healthy, local bounty could find its way to ever more people in ways that mitigate waste and mitigate harm to our planet.

The kin-dom of God is justice, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Finding it is possible with a discerning mind who understands what is good and just, and has the courage of heart to do what needs to be done to set things right. Sometimes that's through research which better the lives of both people and planet. Sometimes it is standing up for someone who could not stand up for themselves. Sometimes it's paying someone else's way from the bank account of our innate privilege.

The kin-dom of heaven is justice and peace. As Anne Lamott says, in *Hallelujah Anyway*, "Images of tiny things, babies, yeast, and mustard seeds can guide us; things that grow are what

change everything. Moments of compassion, giving, grief and wonder shift our behavior, get inside us and change realms we might not have agreed to have changed. Each field is weeds and wheat, but mix the wheat with yeast, the most ordinary of elements, and it starts changing the flour. It becomes bread and so do we, bread to eat and to offer.” (Lamott 176)

Jesus Christ shows us that the greatest love is shown when we risk losing something we hold dear. He sacrificed his life, like the men of the Malawi village, so that we might live and live abundantly. The kin-dom of heaven is *mercy*, justice and peace. May God’s kin-dom reign over all our hearts and guide our actions so that, however small they may seem to us, they bring compassion and mercy to another human being. Let our actions give birth to the kin-dom for someone else.

Our nation is in deep pain. Do not look away. People of discerning minds, you are needed now more than ever.