

Pentecost 8A July 26 2020
Matthew 13:31-33; Romans 8:26-39
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you inseparable from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* Today's lessons invite us to explore how *all things work together for good*, to dare to use our imagination, and to receive the blessing and reassurance that *"[nothing] in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Let's pray:

There's a beautiful word in the English language: synergy, that comes from the Greek: συνεργέω (sunergeó) which means work together, co-operate. Synergy means: where two or more things work together to produce a result far greater than the sum of each individual part.

For example (This is a joke): An old church building needed remodelling, so during his sermon the pastor made an impassioned plea and looked directly at the richest man in the congregation. At the end of the sermon, the rich man stood up and said, "Pastor, I will contribute \$1,000.00."

Just then plaster fell from the ceiling and struck the rich man on the shoulder. He stood up and said, "I will increase my donation to \$5,000.00." Before he could sit down, another chunk of plaster fell on him, so he straightened up and said, "I will double my last donation."

He sat down and a larger chunk of plaster hit him on the head. He jumped up and shouted, "Pastor, I will give \$20,000.00."

This prompted the chairman to shout, "Hit him again, Lord! Hit him again!" Synergy?

Seriously, imagine a coral reef. A great example of synergy in nature is the relationship between the sea anemone and a clownfish. In most good aquariums you'll see a clownfish (like Nemo) swimming through the tentacles of a sea anemone. Why? By themselves, each of these organisms is susceptible to predators. But together, they form a protective shield that protects both of them. This protective shield isn't a physical shield, but more a result from the combination of these two organisms. The predators of the clownfish stay away from the clownfish because the sea anemone will sting them if they get too close. Likewise, for the sea anemone. Clownfish scare away the butterfly fish which eat sea anemones. So, together they help protect each other in a way that they could never do on their own. That's synergy: an arrangement that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Now, imagine a prison. A Gestapo prison in Berlin at the end of December 1944. At a time when the state church was compromised by association with the government, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was active in the "Confessing Church" – an illegal movement of religious resistance. Bonhoeffer lived perilously, working against the government from the inside as an employee of the German military intelligence. He was arrested when it was discovered that he was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He endured 18 months of imprisonment before his execution in April 1945, just before the end of the war. The last poem he wrote in prison was, *By Gracious Powers Wonderfully Sheltered*.^{*} In light of his predicament, a poem about God's sheltering love might seem odd. But Pastor Bonhoeffer couldn't separate the political from the spiritual. This was a "perfect storm," a crisis of conscience where his spiritual integrity could mean the end of his physical life. Bonhoeffer's faith led to his execution, but not before he planted many seeds of faith. His legacy lives on, his words and his story a synergy of their own.

Through parables, Jesus stimulates our imagination. That's what parables are for: teasing our minds into creative imagination. Imagine a field where both weeds and wheat grow together – how should the farmer handle that synergism? Imagine a tiny seed that

grows into a huge shrub; a seed that mysteriously grows big enough to house birds? Imagine the synergy of living and inactive matter – yeast and flour, to produce bread. Imagine a net big enough and fine enough to catch fish of every kind. In other words, try to imagine the kingdom of heaven, the synergy/marriage of human and divine, of mundane and outrageous, of political and spiritual, of pragmatic and awe-inspiring. Imagine this kingdom as subversive, overwhelming, lavish, insistent, and a matter of life and death.

We need to cultivate and grow the spiritual discipline of imagination, because we need it. By stretching our imagination, we open up to a richer and more abundant life. Our imagination allows us to sense the gracious power of the Holy Spirit surrounding, upholding, and embracing us.

Imagination, of course, is limited. Your current reality may be blessed, as though you are drifting over a coral cay without a care in the world, or, it may feel like a prison, with its challenges and restrictions. There're moments when you may feel convicted of God's sheltering and gracious power, and others when you despair of ever feeling his divine blessing. To those in crisis, the apostle Paul throws a lifeline of certainty: "We know that all things *work together* (*sunergeó* in Greek) for good for those that love God, who are called according to his purpose." Paul isn't speaking of idyllic surrounds or comfort or prosperity. He's talking about the love of God, working in and through all situations, whether we feel in control or not: the love of God, subversive, overwhelming, lavish, insistent, and a matter of life and death.

Then Paul presses on, insistently: "If God is for us, who is against us?" and no earthly or spiritual thing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." These are the words that dare us to imagine the world suffused with God's love, and inspire us to care for it and each other. These are the words that allowed Bonhoeffer to imagine a world without tyranny, and inspired him to die for it.

We must rest our imaginations for a bit and look at the here and now. We're sitting in a church. Jesus is talking about seeds and yeast and fish; Paul, about hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, swords; about death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, and anything else in all creation. That's pretty comprehensive, but we might translate them as: illness, cancer, divorce, grief, loneliness, failure, depression. Whatever seems to separate or distract us from the love of God.

So, what do we do when our imagination fails us, and reality oppresses us? Beloved of the Lord, we turn to the community of faith; God's gift that exists as the vehicle for holy synergy. We are more than the sum of our parts. We pay attention to the details of life and claim the presence of God in them. We try to live with integrity and to work for the justice and freedom that God proclaims. We plant tiny seeds that others will water and we invest in fields of hidden treasure for the future. We declare that God is with us!

In 1928, long before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon entitled, "God is With Us." He said, "From baptism to the grave, the word of the church accompanies us, places us under the assurance of the word: 'Remember, I am with you.' As a symbol of this situation, the church places the decisive stages of a person's life under the church's own proclamation." There's no way Bonhoeffer could have known what lay ahead – the decisions, the suffering, the imprisonment and the kind of death he would face. There's no way he could have known that the church into which he was ordained would not remain his spiritual home – that "church" would take on a whole new meaning as small groups of condemned men gathered to pray in prison cells. Can we really say that all things worked together for good for Pastor Bonhoeffer as he was called according to God's purpose? Bonhoeffer thought so, even from the damp, cold darkness of his cell, separated from his friends, his family, his fiancée, and his church; tortured, robbed of judicial process, and condemned to a future that held almost certain death.

Today, we are challenged to find a way, through imagination, prayer, scripture, and the love of this community to make that claim for ourselves. To say that God is for us. To say that there is a synergy, mysterious and compelling, working in our lives. To say that nothing can or will separate us from the love of God. And, to accept the calling that comes with that claim: a calling to love God, to love our neighbours, to love our enemies, and to advocate for peace. When all things work together for those blessings, we will truly sense the presence of God who is for us.

Saints, I want you to imagine. Imagine your own confident waiting, your own frightened soul, your own joyful memories, keeping company with Jesus. Imagine the way we are bound together, a body profoundly greater than the sum of the individuals involved, sharing joys and sorrows, pain and relief, doubts and certainties, love. Imagine how we can dare to live and work together for good, knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love and favour in Christ Jesus our Lord. Just imagine. Amen.

And the love of God, that works together for good for those who love him, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Please turn over the page.

* *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen* (translated as “By gracious powers wonderfully sheltered” or “By gentle powers lovingly surrounded”):

*Surrounded by such true and gentle powers.
So wondrously consoled and without fear,
Thus will I spend with you these final hours
And then together enter a new year.*

*By gentle powers lovingly surrounded,
with patience we'll endure, let come what may.
God is with us at night and in the morning
and certainly on every future day.*

*The worries of the old year still torment us.
We're troubled still by long and wicked days.
Oh Lord, give our frightened souls the healing
For which You've chastened us in many ways.*

*And though You offer us the cup so heavy.
So painful, it's the most that we can stand.
Not faltering, with thanks we will accept it
And take it as a gift from your good hand.*

*And should it be Your will once more to grant us.
To see the world and to enjoy the sun,
Then we will all the past events remember
And finally our life with you is one.*

*D. Bonhoeffer. Dec 1944
(transl. by Ulrich Schaffer)*

<https://www.cloisterseminars.org/blog/2017/12/31/by-gracious-powers-wonderfully-sheltered-a-blessing-for-the-turn-of-the-year> accessed 22/07/2020.