

**Pentecost 8A + July 30, 2017**  
**Romans 8: 26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**  
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI  
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“All things work together for good.” What does this verse from Romans 8 really mean? Often it is summoned to rationalize bad things that happen. “I’m sorry,” we might say to someone who has just suffered a loss, “but God must have a reason. Remember, all things work together for good.”

But do they? The death of a child is never good. Domestic abuse is never good. War is never good. Yet people will say, “Now God has one more angel in heaven,” or “God is testing your endurance,” or “War is good for the economy.”

What Paul is really saying is that, in all things, God’s providential activity is at work for all who love God with all their heart, soul, and mind. But this activity is hidden in a way that rationalizations for bad things happening are not. It is hidden in a baby who sleeps in a cattle trough who is actually the Son of God. It is hidden on the cross, with Jesus crucified between two common criminals, who—unbeknownst to almost everyone—will conquer death and be raised, bodily, to ascend to sit at God’s right hand. Through faith, those who love him are able to follow the crucified God into the darkest corners of pain, loneliness and despair; to seek the light that shines in that darkness, and to find in it the light of life.

The first four parables in our Gospel reading today also address the hidden workings of God’s plan for mending the universe. Jesus gives us a series of little metaphors about what the kingdom of God is like—a mustard seed, yeast, treasure, and a pearl. But to grasp the wisdom hidden within, we have to let go of the expectations that we might bring to each.

We might think that a tiny mustard seed grows into the mightiest of trees. No—it develops into a shrub with wide branches that can accommodate entire flocks of birds in its leaves. We might think Jesus shouldn't be teaching about yeast because in Jewish culture yeast represented the corrupting power of evil. But yeast in a dull lump of dough turns it into a new creation, a tasty loaf of bread. We might think someone who finds a treasure in a field or the perfect pearl would just take these treasures and add them to their existing wealth. No—they sell everything they have in order to be able to fully possess these treasures.

Each of these tells of the hidden processes of growth by which God's kingdom becomes known to God's faithful people. The minuscule mustard seed is the tiny baby who goes on to inaugurate the reign of God whose mission is to make disciples of all people, welcoming all into Jesus' infinitely wide arms. The yeast in the lump of dough describes the mysterious growth of faith that gradually, across the span of a life, turns a person into a new creation in Christ. And the decision by the treasure finders to sell everything so they may truly own the treasure in the field and the pearl tells of a radical discipleship that comes naturally to us as we grow in faith, in which we willingly let go of attachments to material things so that we may come into God's kingdom without any worldly distractions.

And finally, the parable of the fishing net reminds us that a component of true discipleship is to leave all judging to God, for God will separate good from evil at the appropriate time.

Why is Jesus telling us all this? Because God loves us so much that *he* gave up everything for us—even that which was most precious to him, his own Son. God loves us so much that he will give us everything we ask in Jesus' name. God embraces us with this boundless love no matter who we are or what we have done, because all are equal in God's sight. For this reason, nothing in heaven above or on earth below, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

But what do the hidden processes of the kingdom have to do with us, the body of Christ at Atonement Lutheran Church? How are they at work in our midst? And what promise do they hold for the future?

Many of you know that, each Tuesday from 11-1, the ELCA pastors in and around Beloit meet for a text study. Often, though, the time is taken by discussing issues of pastoral ministry or things that are going on in people's lives. This past Tuesday we talked at length about the three ELCA churches in Beloit. It was a fascinating discussion. We talked about how these three churches are all in various stages of decline, yet we are each spending time and money duplicating much of what we do. For example, this summer both Our Savior's and St. Paul are offering Vacation Bible School, congregations that are just three blocks apart. Neither ever talked to the other about doing it together. And wouldn't it have been fun for us to be part of that, too?

So at the text study, the pastors reflected on the concept of a parish model, in which we'd keep our three buildings but use each for a different purpose. Sharing staffing and resources, we'd be able offer important programs together that none of us have right now, such as a children's choir, a youth group, and adult Christian education or Bible study. We'd be celebrating what we have, instead of lamenting what we lack. This could be a system in which all things would work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

In the meantime, here at Atonement we are contemplating starting Sunday School on Rally Day, a family-oriented service Mondays at 6 p.m. beginning next month, and a neighborhood association centered in our building.

This is a time for us to reflect on the promise of life together, in the hopes of new life yet to come.

AMEN.