
Infinitely Increasing Our Lives

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 12, Year A

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen
—*The Hymnal*, no. 388, "O Worship the King," v.5

And you wait, are awaiting the one thing
that will infinitely increase your life;
the powerful, the uncommon,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned towards you.

That's the beginning of one of my favorite poems. It was written by the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke was an Austrian poet who lived for just 51 years, from 1875 to 1926—a hundred years ago. He wrote in German, and the German title for that poem is also one of my favorite German words, *Erinnerung*. It's translated here as, "remembering," but it can also be translated as "memory." Hear the opening lines again.

And you wait, are awaiting the one thing
that will infinitely increase your life;
the powerful, the uncommon,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned towards you.

I remember waiting for something like that in my life. I was a fourteen-year-old teenager, born mid-20th century and coming of age here in Atlanta in the 1960's. After my early schooling in the Atlanta public schools, I was encouraged to apply for admission to a premier New England boarding school. So week after week during that admission process, I eagerly waited and waited and waited to hear the results. And then it happened. One day I got the letter that read, 'Yes!' I was admitted. How exhilarating it was! That's why the last verse of Rilke's *Erinnerung* poem always resounds for me too. It reads:

And you know all at once: That was it.
You arise, and before you stands
a bygone year's
anguish and form and prayer.

Yes, 'I knew all at once: That was it.' I arose from reading that letter and before me stood that past year of anxiety; a year of being shaped by hope and yearning; and a year praying that I would get the opportunity I wanted, and that so many family members, teachers, and elders wanted for me. But what was that thing that I knew "all at once?" I knew the experience of wanting something so earnestly that it qualified, as Rilke said, as 'the one thing that would infinitely increase my life: the powerful, the uncommon, the awakening of stones, depths turned toward me.'

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Now, all of us gathered here today *also* share the experience of yearning for some one thing that would infinitely increase our lives. Yes, both in our lives as people of faith, and in our lives as observers of world events, we have known, "all at once, that was it!" I have in mind some seemingly impossible things that many peoples spent bygone years yearning for, and that finally happened. For example:

- There was the coming down of the Berlin Wall 1989 in Germany. It was something that—when it happened—was ‘the one thing that infinitely increased the life’ of those who yearned for it.
- There was the end of racial apartheid in South Africa, without an all-out race war; something that also—when it happened—was ‘the one thing that infinitely increased the life’ of those who yearned for it.
- And before my lifetime, but still significant for me, there was the occasion that we celebrated last month as Juneteenth—as that day in 1865 when some of the last enslaved people in our country learned that they were ‘free at last; free at last; thank God Almighty, free at last!’

So what counts for you as something like that? What are your experiences, as the poem says?

the powerful, the uncommon,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned towards you.

In our readings today, we hear about a number of things like that. They are all examples that show what “the kingdom of heaven is like.” It’s like that amazing mustard seed, like that marvelous treasure, and like that pearl of great value. But there are two other examples, and they are also metaphors for Jesus’ kingdom of heaven. That kingdom is also like leavening an entire loaf of bread with just a little yeast (Matt. 13:33).

Then there’s a final example of what the kingdom of heaven is like. That kingdom is also like catching “all sorts and conditions of people” (1979 BCP, 814); catching them, on the one hand in the same net. On the other hand, that net is catching people indiscriminately—the righteous and the unrighteous altogether in one net—until the time comes to sort them.

Yes, the climactic example highlights the inclusivity of a fishing net. It’s a so-called generosity that consists in the abundance that comes from diversity and inclusion. That’s right: today’s culture wars about diversity and inclusion offer a timely debate about how to regard God’s kingdom. It’s timely because of the biblical expression that God shows no partiality of persons, and the related claim that therefore neither should we. For some of us that turn of phrase—“no partiality of persons,” is a compelling feature of God’s character, and of Jesus’ teachings. We find variations of God’s non-partiality, and exhortations for us to be Godlike without partiality, throughout the gospels, the Book of Acts, and in the epistles.

But perhaps the ultimate expression of non-partiality is Jesus’ directive to us in the Sermon on the Mount:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be [offspring] of your Father who is in heaven; [who] makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:44-45, 48)

That kind of generosity is so passionate for Jesus, indeed, that we find it embedded in the Passion of his crucifixion and in the deep meaning of his resurrection. “For God so loved the world,” we hear in that often-quoted verse in John’s gospel; “For God so loved the world that [God] gave [the] only Son . . .” (John 3:16). Here is that value of such great worth, for which even God ‘pays the ultimate price.’ That’s exactly what we say about people who give their lives for a greater cause, like the preservation of their country. Even in Godhead there is such passionate love for us, as we declare by faith.

For God—as we affirm—we ourselves are that treasure hidden in a field that is worth paying the ultimate price. For God, each one of us are that pearl of great value that it is worth paying the ultimate price. And so on, and so forth, with the other examples of God’s kingdom in our gospel today. God too is waiting for tiny mustard seeds to grow into a great heavenly kingdom. God too is like a woman leavening an entire loaf of bread. God too is casting a net indiscriminately to catch all sorts and conditions of people for that kingdom.

Accordingly, our spirituality of God’s unconditional love finds resonance with Rilke’s *Erinnerung* poem.

God waits, is awaiting the one thing
that will infinitely increase the divine life;
the powerful, the uncommon,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned toward us.

Here too, we find invoked by St. Paul; invoking the infinity and all-inclusiveness of the divine love in our reading from Romans today.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)

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Now soberly, I'm bound to observe a sad reality as your preacher for today. Sadly, this insight into the depths of God may be just plain too awesome and sublime for human beings consistently to grasp and retain. We are not infinite beings ourselves. It is normally out-of-reach for us to sustain a life that apprehends the divine passion and pathos at such a scale.

As Jesus implicitly acknowledged in the Sermon on the Mount, the best many of us can do is just to love those who are like us, to hate our enemies, and to be indifferent to everyone else in between. So how can we internalize the reality of a God whose capacity for loving all created beings is so inclusive, so persevering, so persistent? Are we really capable of incarnating Godhood at that level?

Of course, with God, as we say, "all things are possible." Moreover, to cooperate with God's will for us, we strive to do our part. We pursue spiritual and contemplative practices, and we devote ourselves to church-related prayers, rituals, and disciplines. Also, we make vows, matrimonial and ministerial, and notably here our concluding Baptismal vow, as we find in the Book of Common Prayer: "to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being" (1979 BCP, 305).

This is also where our Collect for today is on point (1979 BCP, 231).

O God . . . without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal . . .

So, how can we align ourselves with that classic prayerbook petition? How can we more sustainably "pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal?"

Here I conclude with a preacher's set of likely exhortations for you. Like the example of the mustard seed, let your love for things, times and places, and even other people, grow up ultimately into a great love of God and of God's kingdom. Like the example of the woman leavening a whole loaf of bread, let your love for plans, projects, and even other people grow up ultimately into a great love of God and of God's kingdom. Like the example of person selling all he has to buy treasure hidden in a field, and a merchant selling everything to buy a pearl of great value, let your acquisitions and achievements, and even your relationships to family and to others, grow up ultimately into a great love of God and of God's kingdom.

And finally, let us take to heart that example of a net of unconditional love that catches all people indiscriminately. Until God chooses how to sort them out, let that net of God's kingdom be 'our ruler and guide, so that we may pass through things temporal, and lose not the things eternal.' Then it may happen that, again and again, you will know:

. . . know all at once.
That was it.
You will arise, and before you will stand
a bygone year's
anguish and form and prayer.

Amen.