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St. Mary the Virgin, SF
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Final as Interim
Proper 12 A**

A five-year old girl was attending a church wedding in a Baptist church. She'd never been to Sunday School or participated in a worship service. She sat attentively next to her grandmother during the service until the preacher said to the congregation, "Let us pray."

The entire congregation bowed their heads in prayer and as was their custom they cast their gaze toward the floor. The little girl turned to her grandmother, and in the not so soft voice of a child, earnestly asked, "Grandmother, what are they looking for on the floor?"

Whether we know it or not, we are all looking for something when we come to church. When I arrived here at St. Mary's 18 months ago, I was not sure what I would find but I soon discovered that this was a fairly traumatized congregation. This was not true of everyone here, but many parishioners and leaders were hurting.

Very soon it became clear to me that at the very least there were three areas that needed attention in order to help this wonderful congregation move forward with the ministry God has entrusted to all of you.

Together we needed to focus on three "R"s.

- 1. RESOLVE the lingering question around the departure of the last rector.**
- 2. RE-ESTABLISH a harmonious and cooperative relationship among the various members of the parish staff.**

3. REFOCUS the vestry and parish leadership in claiming their role as disciples who have been called by God to join with the clergy in discerning a positive future for both the members of the congregation as well as discerning avenues for ministry and service to the larger community beyond the walls of this lovely church.

For the most part, these three goals have been achieved. Early on I realized that accomplishing these goals was not going to be easy. The vestry and I faced some strong and difficult push back from a small but vocal minority in the parish.

To be perfectly frank, there were days when I just wanted to tell God this was too much for me. But when I felt that way, I went back to Paul's words from today's reading from Romans: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

This message of assurance is one I remind myself of on a regular basis. I also apply a lesson I've learned from being a cyclist. When riding up a steep hill, say of a half-mile or more, looking too far ahead can be overwhelmingly discouraging. The climb is much more manageable if instead of looking too far up the hill, I just look about 8 feet ahead of my bicycle and then just keep peddling, no matter what. Another thing that kept me going is this teaching by Jesus from the Gospel of Mark, (And I've had this saying hanging in my office over these last 18 months): "With God all things are possible" (Mark 10:23)

We were reminded in the Gospel lesson from last week that the wheat and the bad darnel, the good and the bad, look very much alike and often thrive together side by side. That's a truth in the church, in politics, in life in general and in each of our lives in particular. Jesus never promised us that life would be easy or fair....but most of us wish it were. Jesus was very much a realist as well as a person of hope and that is where his sayings about the Kingdom of Heaven come into play.

Jesus holds up before us a dream, a goal, a vision upon which to build our lives.....he declares that what makes life worth living is to be, first and foremost, a citizen in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the Kingdom in many respects is as subtle as it is magnificent. Jesus likens the Kingdom to a tiny mustard seed or a little bit of yeast. Objects that are quite small in the beginning but that have the potential to grow into something quite grand and amazing. The seed, once in your possession, must be planted and nurtured. The yeast must be added to flour, kneaded properly, and allowed to do its work of leavening the dough.

Or if that imagery does not connect with your imagination, Jesus, who was always open to providing options when sharing the truths of God, provides another set of images. He tells us that the Kingdom of heaven “is like treasure hidden in a field,” or it’s like the discovery of a “pearl of great value.”

The treasure and the pearl are both here in the midst of life, just waiting to be discovered. Once discovered, you just naturally want to invest yourself so that the treasure is part of your very being and it becomes the vision which informs your decisions and actions. To make his point even more clear to us Jesus gives us another image regarding his vision for the good and purpose filled life.

The Kingdom is like a net cast in the sea that gathers in both good fish and bad, the good are kept and the bad are cast aside. At least one way to interpret this is to see it in terms of your own life. The more you discover the reality and purpose of God in and for your life, the more you work at incorporating the good and casting out the stuff that is destructive to your being the person God created you to be.

A tiny mustard seed, a bit of yeast, a hidden treasure of great value, a fine pearl, a fishing net, all of these are images of a reality upon which to focus your journey through life...the Kingdom of Heaven. This Kingdom is as close as the natural world as well as in the lives of those who have embraced Jesus’ vision. But this is a reality you have to pursue or as Jesus says, “seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.”

[At the 10 am service] Soon we will baptize a young man into the Christian community and he will begin a journey of discovery as he seeks to know Christ in a more intimate way, just as Christ already intimately knows him.

The Kingdom of Heaven..... Seek and you too will find. That is Jesus' promise to each of us. It is a simple promise. It is also a very profound promise. From the first disciples onwards to this very moment, countless Christians have found his promise to be true.

As you become more involved as a citizen of the Kingdom it will shape you and you will help shape it. It is the reality of divine love healing the brokenness in your life and giving you peace and a new lease on life that transcends and transforms the trials and triumphs of each day.

The Kingdom of Heaven...seek it and it will be opened to you. AMEN