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St. James', Mt. Airy
7/30/17

St. James Day / Pentecost 8/Proper 12A
Genesis 29:5-28
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Today we commemorate St. James the Greater – the patron saint of this parish.

Technically St. James Day falls on July 25, so, in order to celebrate it, we move it to the Sunday following.

St. James was known as the Greater to distinguish him both James the brother of the Lord and the other Apostle James (known as the Lesser).

James and John were the sons of Solome and Zebedee. They were Galilean fishermen, like their father, and scripture tells us that they were two of Jesus' first disciples.

As the story goes, one day they were fishing and unable to catch anything and so they were returning to shore. A man walking on the beach told them to dip their nets one more time, and when they did they caught so many fish their boat almost sank.

That man was Jesus. He called for them to follow him and fish for people for God. And they did.

It appears that James was very close to Jesus. He was one of only three called by Jesus to witness his Transfiguration atop the mountain. That experience showed James that Jesus was indeed God's chosen one, and he followed him down the mountain and eventually to Jerusalem for the last time.

After Jesus' ascension into heaven, James spread the Gospel across what is now Spain for nearly 40 years. When he returned to Jerusalem he was martyred by King Herod – and was the first Apostle to die.

After his death he was taken to Compostela, Spain to be buried. The Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James) is network of ancient pilgrim routes stretching across Europe and that come together at his tomb – and every year thousands of people still make spiritual pilgrimage and walk the Camino.

Three themes that reflect the life, ministry, and death of St. James are incarnation, transformation, and abundance – and they are ways to approach today's Gospel passage as well.

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The kingdom of heaven is like...

Today we get a potpourri of parables about just what this kingdom is like – a mustard seed, leaven, a treasure which is arguably gained by shady means, a merchant, and a net which catches fish of every kind.

What in the world? What do these things have in common? Well, they are all **of** this world, they are all **common**. In these parables Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is down to earth, literally.¹

As Christians, we are called to believe in the **incarnation**, the mystery of the meeting of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. But in these parables Jesus puts that incarnational focus not on himself, but on the world around him.²

The kingdom of heaven is like the most common things in human life. Like Jesus himself, our everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of the divine and human. In this way God's realm is not some esoteric kingdom in the sweet by and by, but is instead envisioned in every nook and cranny of daily life, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.³ When we pay attention, then we can put our minds, hands, and hearts to work in the world.

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Transformation is at the foundation of all these parables. In each telling, Jesus takes things that are subversive or corrupted and presents them as a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven is like – therefore giving them, and the understanding of God's realm, new meaning.

A lot has been made of the mustard seed being so small and then growing so large as to be a nesting place. That's all fine and good, but it takes on a different meaning in the context of the community in which it was originally heard.

¹ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 284.

² *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 284, 286.

³ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 286.

Mustard was a weed, not something you would ever plant a field of. And yes, it has tiny seeds – so tiny and weightless, in fact, that they easily blend into sacks of grain undetected. When that grain is then planted, low and behold, up springs the mustard alongside. It's akin to last week's Gospel of the wheat and tares.

So the kingdom of heaven is like an unwanted weed? Perhaps. Or maybe the kingdom of heaven is something unexpected that comes and invades and overturns the nicely bounded rows we plant in our lives. It pushes us beyond our boundaries, forcing us to discern whether they are our boundaries or God's boundaries.⁴

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When we think of yeast, most of us think of the stuff that comes in packets or jars at the store, but leaven in the time of Jesus was not so sterile, and was in fact considered unclean.

The leaven of yesteryear was created by setting aside a portion of leftover bread to spoil and then be used as the starter for the next loaf.

If it was not spoiled enough, it was worthless as the new bread would not rise; it left to spoil too long, it could cause food poisoning. Leaven could be fatal, but it could also be life-giving.

We are told the kingdom of heaven, then, is like a pinch of leaven that a woman mixes together with three measures of flour until it was all leavened. Prepared lovingly by one who pays attention, three measures of flour would make enough bread to feed a wedding party – gathering people together in joy.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3*, pg. 285, 287

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On the surface saying the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure is fairly innocuous. However, when you think about the fact that someone found a treasure that was not theirs, buried it in a field, and then bought the field so it became theirs, it becomes more muddy.

But this parable, along with the one that directly follows it about the merchant who purchased the pearl of great value, point us away from the thief and the merchant themselves, and instead toward their actions.

In both cases heaven is likened to the valuable object, and we are told that they went and sold all they had to gain them. So it is that we, all of us, must be ready and willing to give things up in order to come close to the reign of God.

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For the second week in a row we get the weeping and gnashing of teeth. As New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine once remarked, it sounds like a trip to the dentist gone horribly wrong.

When I read passages like this one, that include the eschatological sorting of the good and bad, it tends to be all I see. But the sorting itself is not what is compared to the kingdom of heaven. No, it is the net cast wide that caught fish of every kind.

To come close to the kingdom we too must be willing to cast the wide net. It is not our job to sort – that we are told is the work of angels. But to make the kingdom of God present, we must welcome all into our midst and be ready to be transformed by their presence.

This is really what all these parables are about – not just transforming the suspect images of mustard seed, leaven, someone who gains ill-gotten treasure, a merchant, or a net and catch of fish – they are instead an invitation into transforming our lives so that we make known and live into the kingdom of God.

It happened when a Galilean fisherman dropped his nets and followed the one who was the Christ.

It happens when God's grace disturbs the orderly garden of our lives, when we have the courage to use the leaven, when we turn our hearts to God and away from the treasures of the world, when we confront barriers to inclusion within our hearts and our communities.

And it happens when as individuals, and as a community, we live lives of **abundance**.

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The world around us operates on scarcity – the idea that there is never enough – enough money, enough stuff, enough time, enough beauty, enough anything.

The kingdom of heaven – here and now – operates on abundance and radical generosity. All things come from God, and when we unreservedly share what we have – and who we are – we partake in the spreading of God's kingdom.

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St. James walked alongside the incarnate Jesus, he witnessed Jesus' transformation on the mountaintop – and eventually his resurrection – and he lived God's abundant love, spreading the good news of God in Christ, until the day he died.

My prayer for this community on the day we celebrate the saint who's image we are called into, is that we, too, will witness and work make known the kingdom of heaven, here and now.

~ AMEN ~