

**LEARNING TO SMILE**  
**PENTECOST 8 – PROPER 12 – JULY 26, 2020**  
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Teddy, our grandson, will be 3 months old on Saturday.

He is such a healthy, happy baby.

He has already learned so much in less than 90 days.

The most charming thing is that he has learned to smile back.

His face bursts into pure delight when he sees his sisters and brother,  
his father and mother, beam at him.

Now, let's imagine that someone had given you the job,

while he was still growing in the darkness of his mother,

of explaining to Teddy about smiles, about families, about being hungry,

about music, about love, about the world he would soon enter.

He's never seen a face. If he opened his eyes, he'd see nothing.

He's never been hungry; though he might be aware of something going on  
if Sarah ate hot sauce (which she loves) or cabbage.

Neither of my babies liked it when I ate cabbage.

Teddy doesn't even know he's a baby

or that he's nestled inside another person.

He may have heard some sounds: his mother's heartbeat,

sirens, maybe even voices – but he wouldn't know what they were.

Of course, he doesn't have any language, either.

It would be a hard thing to help Teddy understand what's coming next.

But no one taught him anything before the day came when next is now;  
and without his consent or intent,

he emerged into the world and began the adventure of learning about life.

The contrast between babies' lives in the womb

and what's waiting for them when they are suddenly born

is the best analogy I have for trying to convey

the struggle Jesus must have had to describe heaven to us earth-dwellers.

Jesus already knew what all Creation is destined for – when God is all in all, when every enemy –  
all the evil that brings suffering – is vanquished, and when even death has been destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

But humanity has words for only those things we have some experience with,

so we just don't have a lot of ways to talk about

the nature of God's Kingdom that is beyond all evil and death,

when creation is enveloped in the utter perfection of God's eternal life

Jesus tried, though, by talking about things we do understand:

Bushes and birds and bread, fields and pearls and fishing.

The kingdom of heaven is somehow like all of those.

How?

First, the kingdom of heaven is about abundance, a big ol' bush coming out of a little tiny seed,

As I pointed out last week, every speck of dirt in Creation was created by the one God,

and in verse after verse of Chapter 13,

Matthew has Jesus talking about God sowing seeds.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:26-28

In the first parable, God is the “Someone” who does everything:  
providing the dirt, the seed, the planting, and the growth into a big ol’ bush.

We are the birds who just happen to come across it after all the work is done  
and make our home safe in its branches, much like every human just happens to be born  
and makes this fragile earth our island home.

The same for the bread dough: God is the woman (the WOMAN!)  
who hides yeast in some 60 pounds of flour to make 100 loaves of bread.

God does all the work: bringing the flour and hiding the yeast in it,  
yeast which works through the dough to make enough bread to feed a hundred hungry people.

The Kingdom of Heaven provides for the creatures of earth  
without our doing a thing to make it happen.

The next parables, about treasure and pearls and fish, all make the same point:

God is doing all the work in these, too.

We – humanity – are the hidden treasure and the precious pearl  
that God gives everything God has to own,

Just as God gave everything – indeed, God’s own life – to redeem us.

We – humanity – are the fish that God spreads out a net to get and to bring into God’s presence.

Oops, but wait: some of the fish are “bad,” literally, “rotten.” Stinky.

Those stinky fish are cast away.

Remember what I said earlier, that the nature of the realm beyond death  
is that everything is enveloped in the utter perfection of God’s eternal life.

This means that no darkness at all, no evil, no rottenness, no stinky fish  
will be present in that utter perfection of the eternal life that Creation is destined for.

Obviously, evil and death MUST be vanquished, completely eliminated,  
for utter perfection to be total and eternal.

It is God’s will for this to happen,

and we can’t stop Creation from getting to the destination God is bringing it.

Even though we can’t stop it, we can choose to be part of God’s project,  
or we can choose to resist God’s will.

Humanity, unique among all life on this planet,  
has free will, a choice on whether or not to be stinky fish.

Stinky fish are selfish, looking only to serve themselves, not their neighbors.

Stinky fish bring the suffering to others as Paul describes: trouble, distress, harassment, famine,  
nakedness, danger, and the sword, causing their eyes to shed rivers of tears.

Those things weren’t all invented in January of 2020!

Ultimately, though, stinky fish bring the same suffering into their own lives,  
and they, to, will weep and grind their teeth.

Yes, one of the great mysteries of human existence

is why God gives humanity the choice to be stinky fish, to choose to do evil.

The best answer I know to that is that this ability to choose  
is what also enables to be in a mutual relationship with God and each other  
with a depth of commitment that can come only when we are aware  
that we have the ability to choose to love or not.

God has already chosen to love us to death, and committed God’s life to us.

Jesus Christ is literally the incarnation of that choice and that commitment.

This choice and commitment, shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,  
is the personification of the utter perfection of life beyond death

that Creation is destined for, a plan, says Paul, where all humans will become just like Jesus,  
loving God and each other as God loves us. What great news!

The best news is that God's love for us cannot be stopped by any other power in the universe.

Birds can't stop bushes from growing,  
hidden treasures and precious pearls can't stop seekers from finding them;  
fish can't outswim nets held by the angels of God.

As with weeds, though, the job of sorting the good and bad fish  
is NOT one that any human being, besides the Son of God, is qualified for.

Also, just like each of us is field with a mixture of wheat and weeds,  
we are also rivers with a mixture of good fish and stinky ones.

In the call to discipleship, we are called to learn to love God and each other the same way God loves us.

Jesus invites humanity to learn to live in that love now like good fish, calling us to be his disciples.

In training as his disciples, we have the gift given to King Solomon so long ago:  
the old treasure of a wise and understanding mind able to distinguish good from evil.

The new treasure we have is God's love for us in Christ, a love that cannot be overcome  
by death or life, angels or rulers, present things or future things, powers or height or depth,  
or any other thing that is created.

The promise we have is that God is always and forever for us, and God knows that, on this side of death,  
we are still little babies who simply can't fully understand the Kingdom of Heaven  
any better than a toddler can understand Calculus. We need so much help!

So, consistent with God's will, in our weakness, uncertainty, suffering and struggle,  
God's Spirit is praying in, with and for us, because God wants us to be utterly perfect, too,  
and learn how to live with God in eternal life as Christ's brothers and sisters.

We get to choose how to respond: to go our own selfish, stinky way,  
or to love God back and be part of how God's will is done on earth as in heaven.

Our choice doesn't make God love us more or love us less,  
though I think choosing to be a stinky fish does break God's heart.

Yet God will keep giving everything to us until all Creation is utterly perfect.

When we learn to trust God's love and God's ways,  
like Teddy, our faces will burst into pure delight  
because we know and see our Father Eternal, the Ruler of creation,  
is already beaming at us.

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#### **COLLECT OF THE DAY:**

You are great, O God, and greatly to be praised. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Grant that we may believe in you, call upon you, know you, and serve you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

#### **1 KINGS 3:5-12**

The Lord appeared to Solomon at Gibeon in a dream at night. God said, "Ask whatever you wish, and I'll give it to you."

Solomon responded, "You showed so much kindness to your servant my father David when he walked before you in truth, righteousness, and with a heart true to you. You've kept this great loyalty and kindness for him and have now given him a son to sit on his throne. And now, Lord my God, you have made me, your servant, king in my father David's place. But I'm young and inexperienced. I know next to nothing. But I'm here, your servant, in the middle of the people you have chosen, a large population that can't be numbered or counted due to its vast size. Please give your servant a discerning mind in order to govern your people and to distinguish good from evil, because no one is able to govern this important people of yours without your help."

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had made this request. God said to him, "Because you have asked for this instead of requesting long life, wealth, or victory over your enemies—asking for discernment so as to acquire good judgment—I will now do just what you said. Look, I hereby give you a wise and understanding mind. There has been no one like you before now, nor will there be anyone like you afterward."

**PSALM 119:129-136**

- Ⓐ Your decrees are wonderful; therefore I obey them with all my heart.
- ⓐ **When your word goes forth it gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.**
- Ⓐ I open my mouth and pant; I long for your commandments.
- ⓐ **Turn to me in mercy, as you always do to those who love your Name.**
- Ⓐ Steady my footsteps in your word; let no iniquity have dominion over me.
- ⓐ **Rescue me from those who oppress me, and I will keep your commandments.**
- Ⓐ Let your countenance shine upon your servant and teach me your statutes.
- ⓐ **My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.**

**ROMANS 8:26-39**

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. We know this because God knew them in advance, and he decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of his Son. That way his Son would be the first of many brothers and sisters. Those who God decided in advance would be conformed to his Son, he also called. Those whom he called, he also made righteous. Those whom he made righteous, he also glorified.

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *We are being put to death all day long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

**MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52**

He told another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, they pulled it to the shore, where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers. But the bad fish they threw away. That's the way it will be at the end of the present age. The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people, and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

They said to him, "Yes."

Then he said to them, "Therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest."

**SERMON HYMN: *Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation***

**BLESSING:** God bless your eyes to see the world as God sees, your lips to speak to others as if to Christ, your hands and work and heal in the power of the Holy Spirit, your minds to discern what is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. Our Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit bless your hearts and set them on fire.