

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Roger Alling

Sunday, June 24, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Kings 3:5-12 Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Our grandson made great progress last week in his current course of study and we are proud of him. He is ten months old and his current academic work is learning how to walk. You still have to hold his hands, but he has made one significant move in the right direction. He now knows that you can't go forward if you step on your right foot with your left or your left foot on your right. Having now passed that big barrier, who knows what the future holds for the young man?

Grand parenting is fun. You are reminded of your own parenting as you watch your daughter rushing about washing clothes and preparing meals while your job is to hold, observe and delight in the wonder of the new life which is developing before your very eyes.

Bringing a new child into the world and being responsible for his growth and welfare is a brave act. One never knows for sure, how it will all work out.

When the baby is young you hover over him as though he was another appendage of your own body. Deep down, however, you already know that one day he will be his own man. He will grow into his own life where he, like all of us, must take responsibility for himself and his future.

Grand parenting is also fun in that it allows you to relive your own experience of parenting, this time with a lot less hassle. It reminds me that parenting is mysterious, wonderful, challenging and risky. In my own personal reflection this past week, I asked myself if this is what parenting is like for us, what must parenting be for God?

That thought reminded me of a conversation I had years ago in a seminar in graduate school, when we asked our professor, what in his opinion, was the greatest theological mystery of all. After a moment's reflection, the professor said, "The greatest mystery is that there is anything at all, the mystery of God's creation of the world."

Now that is parenting on the grand scale. The joy and challenge that our daughter is experiencing now can be seen as an earthly icon of what it means for God to be our Parent and for all of us to be the siblings in his great Family.

Life is about our important relationships. Authentic life is about our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with each other. None of this is automatic. We have been created as free beings. We have the capacity to ignore our vertical relationship with God and the capacity to violate our relationships with our brothers and sisters in this world. Our freedom then is both our blessing and our curse. It is what makes God's creation of us so risky. God could have made us as robots. God chose, however, to make us free beings, made in the very image of God.

Our daughter Allison and son-in-law Nick are taking all their chances on their baby boy. God is taking all of God's chances on all of us.

I suggested a moment ago that the freedom God endowed us with was a risky commodity. Apparently it has been seen as such right from the start.

In the well known story in the Old Testament, grasping that knowledge and freedom got us expelled from the natural paradise of the Eden garden complicating our original fellowship with God. As the story goes, soon thereafter in the earliest generation, siblings continued our downward slide as Cain murders his brother Able.

These old stories are snapshots of our human situation. They describe the way we find ourselves in this world. A quick glance at any newspaper will tell you that not much has changed. We are still killing each other with a sickening efficiency. What's more, our disputes with each other in God's one Family of Siblings is never more intense than when we dispute with each other about God and our various practices of religion.

When I think about how hard it is for me to watch the news each day, I can barely imagine what it must be for God to witness the dysfunctional family that we have become.

During our week in Rhode Island we did more than enjoy our new grandson. We also observed our daughter at work as a new mother.

I was amazed at all the new equipment available for parenting. I was especially impressed with the monitor. When the baby was put down for his nap the monitor was turned on. Every sound from the nursery was broadcast through a speaker on Allison's hip. After a few hard cries, up the stairs she went....help was on the way.

God's monitor must be some gadget. It worked well also, and at the right time as God would have it.....help was on the way for us as well.

Through the long history of Israel, the grim realities of our human situation had not been ignored. Through sages and prophets our heavenly Parent reached out to the Family encouraging us to return from our brokenness and be healed.

In the end God entered into the family directly to deal with our distress and point us in a new direction.

Jesus was a teacher and a preacher. When his public ministry began he went through the countryside with a message. He came preaching and teaching using an image he called the Kingdom of God or as Matthew expresses it, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus taught that God's kingdom was breaking into human history now. It was a confusing new idea. Even Jesus disciples had difficulty grasping what he was talking about. To help them and to help us, Jesus used parables, stories taken from ordinary life designed to help us understand our extraordinary relationship with God. Several of these parable pictures are presented to us today.

We have to imagine some of the human questions for which these pictures were the answer. They are like a jeopardy game with Alex Trebec on TV. Jesus has the answer and we must come up with the question. Let's try this out: I will imagine the human question, and then I will paraphrase the parable answer.

Our question: "The whole idea of the Kingdom of God seems so vast. How can I comprehend it?"

The Parable answer: *It is like a grain of mustard seed. It starts in a small way in your life and in the world, but it has the capacity to grow into something large and important. There is room for you there and room for others as well. What's more, it is not intended just for our own little group. This kingdom is like leaven or yeast. It is a small part of the recipe for bread, but it eventually makes the whole loaf rise. The loaf is for the whole family. Indeed it is Bread for the world."*

Our Question: I have spent years looking for a satisfactory meaning for my life and haven't found it yet, but my brother just goes along from day to day taking things as they come and letting what happens just happen. Which of us is doing it right?

The Parable answer: *"Some of us will stumble across the important truths about God and life and be wonderfully surprised. Others like you will find the treasure at the end of your diligent searching. Both of you will be satisfied when you find these truths, but you will need to guard and value this treasure above all else when you find it, otherwise you might lose it again."*

Our Question: Why do you keep all the trash fish? When we are emptying our nets, we toss those right back. It makes me worry about this Kingdom of yours. You sound like you want everyone in it. Why aren't you more discriminating? If I can see just how awful some of these people are, why can't you? You seem too generous to me.

The Parable answer: *"You seem to have forgotten that I am everyone's Parent and I don't make junk. Many of these people have a long way to go. You did too at one time. Besides, I have more time and resources than you even know about. You might try praying for these brothers and sisters of yours and do whatever you can for them if you have the opportunity. That would help me by the way."*

There are lots of other parables, signs and symbols of the new Kingdom that Jesus announced in his ministry. I believe that each of them probably had a human question behind them for which the signs and stories were designed.

The vision of new life in community that they conveyed attracted both disciples and enemies for Jesus.

The disciples were filled with hope by Jesus' vision. His enemies found that Jesus' vision threatened their positions and their power. In the end his enemies put Jesus to death as their way of attempting to stamp out his vision.

Our heavenly Parent, however, was not to be thwarted, nor was Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom to be cast aside. God raised Jesus and God raised up the new Community to guard the vision and to share it with the world.

Never has this vision of a renewed and reconciled human community been more important than it is now. It is our answer and our response to the horrors that fill our newspapers each and every day.

At the end of today's list of parables Jesus asked those first disciples if they had understood his teaching. They said, "Yes". Jesus then designated them and designates us as scribes and masters of the household. We are to bring out these treasures and share them with the world.

When you spend a week with your daughter and your grandson and then leave and return home, you wish the very best for them. That's what parents and grandparents always do. What do we really want and hope for our children?

But what do we want for them most? All the usual good things, I suppose: health, happiness, love and joy. To wish less would be cruel. And yet there is more, isn't there? What might it be?

Let me answer this question with a very brief reflection on the astounding dialogue between God and Solomon that was read in our very first lesson this morning. That dialogue is instructive and may help all of us to be better parents, better grandparents and better neighbors.

God asks Solomon what it is that Solomon wants. It is clear that God expects Solomon to want all the usual human things; in his case, long life, riches, and victory over enemies are cited.

However, Solomon surprises God, because Solomon sets those things aside in favor of a greater gift. What he requests of God is a wise and discerning mind.

Solomon did not ask for all the answers of life to be handed to him on a plate. He asked for the ability to think clearly and to be able to ask the right questions. He asked for openness and good judgment, for a wise and a discerning mind.

Our grandson's name is Teague and right now he is learning how to walk. When walking is accomplished then the question will be direction and that raises another host of issues.

Therefore, along with all the usual good things, I wish for him a wise and discerning mind that he may have a sense of where to go in his life and what to do when he gets there.

We all need things from God and we ask for them quite often. Solomon had a wonderful ability to put first things first in his requests. It would be a good idea for all of us to follow his lead. Ask yourself this question: Whatever would you trade for a wise and discerning mind?