



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Plastic, Pearls, and Paradise

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 30, 2023

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Based 1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Good morning, Church! This week people everywhere are invited to join the multitudes in envisioning a universe where there is no crying, no pain, no sorrow, no strain, where night and day alike are devoid of fear, and where justice and joy are free and unlimited.

And I am of course talking about... *Barbieland*.

Have you seen the movie? It's an enchanting world imagined by director Greta Gerwig—75 and sunny, no aging or wrinkles, no war, no death, and brilliant women rule the day. Pink Palm Springs meets Mattel Movie Magic. Without giving too much away, what's not to love?

The only problem with this utopia is that it's plastic: pretty, somewhat pliable but also artificial, easily breakable, image-focused, imaginary. The movie itself is refreshingly self-aware, wrestling with the tension wherein Barbie can be empowering to women and girls and all of us on one hand but also discouraging—lifting up beauty, appearance and performance standards that promote a culture of perfectionism, materialism, and toxic comparison.

The phenomenon of Barbenheimer offers rich ground for social commentary and theological reflection. The liturgical timing is uncanny. Yesterday the Episcopal Church celebrated the 49th anniversary of the Philadelphia Eleven, eleven trailblazers who were illegally ordained as the first women priests in the whole Anglican Communion. A seismic event in the life of the church that reminds us change is possible in a universe that bends toward justice. Next Sunday we will observe Nuclear Prayer Sunday, as we strive for the day when nations will lay down their swords and war will be no more.

Sometimes I fear that when people outside the church—and also within it—consider the Kingdom of Heaven, the idea that comes to mind is something like Barbieland. A childish fantasy incapable of penetrating the real world with any relevance. After all, the most of heaven is probably in Revelation, where the garden of Eden is restored with golden streets and crystal fountains, the sun never sets, and the children of God join with the angels in singing unceasing praises to the lamb forever and ever and ever. A nightmare for even the most enthusiastic chorister.

The evangelist Beth Moore once asked her granddaughter what she learned at church, and she said, "I learned that heaven is like prison where you get sent when you die. Except it's a good prison!"

In the popular imagination, Adam and Eve might as well be Barbie and Ken. Thus the choice we're left with to orient our lives is pink plastic paradise of Barbie or ruthless realism of nuclear threat. Escapism or dread. Can religion offer anything more than what Marx described as the opiate of the masses? Is there hope to be found amidst a world of despair?

Enter scene, Jesus. Once again teaching in parables, the kingdom he describes is nothing like Barbieland. Utterly down to earth.

The kingdom of God is like:

- A mustard seed.
- Yeast
- A hidden treasure
- A pearl of great value

While highly familiar, these images are also highly surprising and subversive.

Mustard trees were regarded as weeds, not unlike kudzu down South. They are an invasive species.

He goes on to say the Kingdom of heaven is like a woman adding yeast to flour. In Jewish tradition the Passover calls for families to diligently sweep their houses for any trace of yeast, lest the entire household be defiled. Yeast and, too often, women are thought to be ritual contaminants.

The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field that someone found and hid again, only to buy the field. Apparently the kingdom of God looks something like insider trading. What was that guy doing in someone else's field to begin with?

Likewise the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who sells all he has to buy the one pearl of great value. Neither a logical or pragmatic purchase, it is beautiful, but useless.

The delightful thing about parables is they can have multiple meanings. Rabbis would use them to invite reflection. And hearers are invited to imagine themselves in various roles. And so these parables have much wisdom to offer about what we are supposed to do in the kingdom of God. We are the sowing farmer, the mischievous baking woman, the treasure hider, and the pearl buyer. We are called to live out our faith in ways that disrupt the status quo, give of ourselves for the sake of virtue and beauty, and treasure God above all.

I think these parables also say a lot about who we already are as human beings made in the image of God. We are the mustard seed, full of potential and possibility to flourish in the world with a contagious and invasive love. We are the yeast meant to transform and challenge cultural structures and meet the hungers of our world. You and I and we collectively are the treasure in the field. We are the pearl of great value, for whom God in Christ was willing to give up everything to claim as children of the kingdom.

Jesus says earlier in Matthew that this kingdom of God is already at hand—among us, around us, within. Not far off but very near. Not something to be grasped but embraced. As close as our next breath. Like that treasure in the field, scripture says in Colossians, our life is hidden with Christ in God. Our souls are secure. We needn't fear judgment, when it comes time to sort the fish. Judgment belongs to God alone.

How would internalizing the knowledge that we are all like that pearl of great value—loved beyond measure, beautiful not for what we do, achieve, or produce—change us if we truly believed it. How would it change our world? Far from pie in the sky, this kingdom of God has the possibility to penetrate our hearts and to permeate the real world with. Whereas opiates dull the senses, this knowledge has the power to actually awaken our minds, heal our hearts, and mend our world.

A couple weeks ago I had the opportunity to spend some time with Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. He said the question he is most often asked is, "How did you maintain your calm through all the death threats, hate mail, and nastiness coming your way?" What he said is that

when you know you are loved, immeasurably and unconditionally, and you know it deep down, and you know that no one can take that away from you, it is almost limitless what you can do and how you can be in the world. And if you're not feeling loving on a given day, you can just keep it to yourself!

My friends, can you remember the last time you were lost for words. There are moments in life that leave us speechless and even breathless. Moments of profound joy: a new baby, a breathtaking sunset. But also moments of horror, tragedy, violence. "I can't breathe," the cry of Eric Garner and so many others crushed by the weight of state violence and oppression. There is a famine of breath in our land and a famine of breathtaking wonder and awe at the sacredness of every human being.

Paul's letter to the Romans says that creation itself is groaning, and we can see it for ourselves as this planet struggles to breathe. We all saw the sky over our city turn red. Ocean temperatures rise, glaciers melt, the same plastic that Barbies are made of and nuclear material that Oppenheimer mastered join with pollutants of every kind to plague the earth we share. Something is deeply wrong and we can feel it.

So if not bad religion, then choose your opiate. Substances, food, tv, work, music, travel. How do you escape? Even as we run, God yearns to draw near. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit comes to us in our speechlessness and breathlessness and prayerlessness with sighs, groans of her own, deeper than words can express.

We turn away. God draws near, with empathy and comfort. Sociologist and researcher Brené Brown says that the difference between surface (plastic) sympathy and deep empathy is when sympathy sees a friend in a hole, sympathy peeks his head over the edge, maybe dips a toe in to say hello. Empathy crawls right in. Sympathy uses comparison to offer shallow comfort. Oh, Johnny got kicked out of school? Well at least Sally is a straight-A student. You're having a tough time in your marriage? At least you have a marriage. The sky turned red last month and catastrophic climate change threatens the human race? Well, at least we'll go out with warmer winters in New York! Silver linings. It could be worse! Empathy says, thank you for sharing. That sucks. I don't know what to say, but I'm really glad you told me. Let's sit here a while. I'm here for you.

This kind of empathy and, in fact, radical solidarity are at the center of Paul's letter to the Romans, which climaxes at the end of today's reading. Paul declares, "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."

Paul's conviction was not naive. Not only had he experienced nearly everything on his laundry list, he trusted in one who took on flesh, faced the powers of death on a cross, and went to hell and back for us, that we might be more than conquerors.

If 1 Corinthians 13 "love is patient, love is kind" is Paul's quintessential wedding text, Romans 8 is his quintessential funeral text, full of hope and promise. But I have to say that in recent years as clergy, I feel it has especially become the quintessential text at funerals of those who have died by suicide. It has come up enough in recent years to have developed that association, including clergy and laity who have died by suicide in the Episcopal Church.

Statistically it something that each of us is not more than a few degrees removed from. It touches us all. Globally nearly 800,000 people die by suicide each year, and it is the 2nd leading cause of death in the world for those aged 15-24 years, affecting people of all ages, races, genders and classes. And it's one of the most common questions in our Newcomers classes here at St. Bart's. Is suicide, as some traditions teach, an unforgivable sin? Many are afraid to talk about it or speak in euphemisms because of the stigma

or because of the notion that talking about it will plant an idea in someone's head, which has actually been debunked.

So let me say clearly and unequivocally: Death by suicide is neither sin nor unforgivable because in life and in death, we belong to our Creator. Your life and mine are hidden with God in Christ. You are Beloved beyond measure. Period.

Suicide is an epidemic that we must begin speaking openly about in the church and society. Please come to any of the clergy here at St. Bart's and dial the national suicide hotline at 988 if you are having suicidal ideation. We are here to listen and help without judgment.

There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The flip side is that the love of God in Christ still does not promise to separate us from death, life, angels, rulers, present, future, powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation. God only promises to be with us and invites us to join in companioning one another and shaping a community of empathy.

Because, my friends, there is also an epidemic of isolation and loneliness in our world right now. The surgeon general named it. Whether you are facing life or death, valley depth or mountain height, because God knows it can be lonely at the top, too: loneliness doesn't discriminate.

It's not an exaggeration to say that our collective society is suicidal. Through climate catastrophe and war, hatred, violence, and oppression, humanity is at risk of self-destruction. If there is sin, it is in the loss of community, concern and care for one another in love. Isolation reinforces a brute individualism that feeds on greed, competition, and dominance—every man for himself.

It is hard to crawl in the hole and sit with the dis-ease in our world. To consider the maladies that confound us and the pain of our neighbors and of ourselves. We would much rather find escape to another time and place. And yet, our brother Jesus, the firstborn of a large family, reminds us today that the kingdom of God is at hand. Not far off but very near. In this very real, broken and beautiful world, Jesus reminds us that he is very near. You and I are valuable beyond measure.

We cannot afford to have a plastic faith. The stakes are too high. Let us stake our lives on the renewable resources of God's gracious spirit, who works all things for good.

As we come forward to this altar once again to receive God's broken flesh and blood poured out, may we open our hands and hearts with a renewed faith: childlike but not childish, imaginative but not imaginary, image-conscious for the image of God dwelling in every human, concerned with matter but not materialistic. As St. Augustine says, we behold who we are and become what we receive. This is the pearl of great price.

The kingdom of Heaven is here. Amen.

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