

"Come to me, parable-telling God, metaphor-lavish with images to say you love me, until your word-palette paints new meaning into my life." *Wendell Berry*

I've always loved parables.

Not because they explain things. They don't. In fact, they usually leave us with more questions than answers.

For me, it's that they make us look at ordinary things - a seed, a loaf of bread, a pearl - and we see something we hadn't noticed before.

That's what parables do. They teach us to see.

We might also notice that with these stories, Jesus never fully defines the Kingdom of God. I mean, he doesn't give us a bunch of theology or doctrine. Instead, he tells us stories, and he encourages us to imagine and engage with them.

So, you might remember that three years ago, when the lectionary brought us these very same parables from Matthew's Gospel, I invited you to finish Jesus' sentence for yourselves: *"The Kingdom of God is like..."*

And after spending four years among you, Atonemates, I have a few more parables of my own. And maybe you do too.

So today, I'd like to offer you a few more.

The Kingdom of God is like four years.

Four years doesn't seem very long. Just four turns of the seasons. Just over two hundred Sundays.

And yet...

Four years is long enough to know one another's names. Long enough to baptize babies and say goodbye to saints. Long enough to celebrate milestones and stand together through heartbreak. Long enough to know who always makes the coffee, who picks after everyone else has gone home, who's good at herding cats, and who slips an encouraging note into someone's mailbox just when it's needed.

Four years is long enough to become family.

When I arrived, none of us really knew what these four years would hold. Of course, there were plans. There were hopes. There were some anxieties about the future.

But that's the thing about the Kingdom. It rarely arrives all at once. It grows.

One Sunday at a time.

One prayer.

One conversation. One coffee hour.

One welcome.

One knitting circle. One rummage sale.

One child running down the aisle during the service.

One funeral. One baptism. One wedding.

One Kids Night Out, where kazoos echoed through the building.

One Bridge Fellowship gathering with new friends.

One live stream. One vestry meeting.

One gathering of spirits in the office on just another weekday, so Kara can't get any work done.

One unexpected moment of grace.

Just one ordinary Sunday after another.

Until one day you look around and realize... *God has been building the Kingdom right here with you all along.*

And maybe the Kingdom is like a choir.

Now, I have to talk about Jerry for a minute.

If you've ever sung under Jerry's direction, you know he has this wonderful habit of believing you can do more than you think you can. He'll put a piece of music in front of the choir, and you can almost hear people thinking, "Really? You think we can sing this?"

Jerry stretches us. He challenges us. He keeps it interesting. He somehow manages to make hard work fun. And before long, the choir is singing something they never imagined they could sing. Not because every note is perfect. (I sure know that!)

But because we've learned to listen. Listen to Jerry. Listen to each other. To breathe together. To trust one another.

And that's when the music happens.

I think churches aren't all that different.

Because over these four years, we've learned to listen to and for one another in so many ways.

When someone needed a meal. When someone needed prayers. When someone simply needed someone to sit beside them. We've opened our doors to neighbors who have become friends. And we've welcomed God's children of all ages who discovered that church can be a place of joy and acceptance.

We've filled this place with music. We've asked hard questions. We've laughed—a lot.

We've been serious when life demanded seriousness. And we've been wonderfully silly.

And somewhere along the way, *Christ has been teaching us to sing together.*

Yes, the Kingdom of God is like that.

And finally...

The Kingdom of God is like a candle.

As I was praying about this sermon, I kept thinking about those Christmas Eve and Easter Vigil services when we pass along the light to each other.

We begin in darkness. Then, one candle lights another. And when that happens, when the light passes from one to another, the first candle loses nothing of itself. Its flame isn't diminished at all. Instead, the whole room becomes brighter.

That's what Christ's love is like. That's what the Church is meant to be.

Over these four years, we've carried Christ's light for one another.

I'd like to think there were times I carried it for you. But if I'm honest... there were many more days when you carried it for me.

You carried it in your kindness. In your prayers. In your patience. In your generosity. In your faithfulness. In your willingness to try new things and indulge some of my crazy ideas.

You carried it when ministry was joyful. And you carried it when ministry was hard.

And, you know, that light was never mine. And it was never yours. It has always belonged to Christ. We have had the privilege of carrying it for one another.

I came here in August of 2022 to be your priest for a season. And somewhere along the way, something happened that I never expected.

Instead, you became my people. You loved me. You taught me. You challenged me. You forgave me. You trusted me with your deepest joys and your deepest sorrows. You invited me into your lives.

And somewhere in the middle of all those ordinary Sundays...you found your way into my heart.

And I love you. And I will miss you more deeply than I can say. A piece of my heart will always belong to you, dear Atonemates.

And here's what I know.

Soon another priest will stand in this pulpit. And you'll do what you have always done.

You'll welcome them.

You'll encourage them.

You'll challenge them.

You'll laugh with them.

You'll pray with them.

You'll pass the light to them.

Because that's who you are.

And I'll carry your light wherever God calls me next.

Every time I remember your faith.

Every time I remember Jerry coaxing one more beautiful anthem out of the choir.

Every time I remember gathering at tables with you.

Every time I remember the countless ordinary moments when Christ showed up because you showed up.

I'll give thanks.

Three years ago, I asked you to finish Jesus' sentence.

"The Kingdom of God is like..."

Well, after four years with you, I know one more answer.

The Kingdom of God is like the people of Atonement.

Ordinary people who keep showing up. Who keep making room. Who keep singing. Who keep passing the light. Who keep loving one another.

Thank you.

For trusting me. For teaching me. For laughing with me. For loving me.

It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to be your priest.

So, keep singing. Keep making room. Keep passing the light.

Because that's what God's Kingdom looks like.

And thank you... for showing it to me.

Amen.