

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The kingdom of heaven is like... I'll share with you what I experienced, but first I want you to know that the kingdom of heaven is something that happens, it is not a place, it's both present and future, already/not yet.

My dad died unexpected just before Christmas 19 years ago at the hospital in Bemidji. He and my mom drove up to Bemidji a couple days earlier, to see my grandma, dad's mom, as she was not expected to live more than a very short time. They got there, saw grandma, dad was admitted to the hospital, grandma died one day, dad the next. We lived in California at the time, and Cynthia had already made a reservation for me to fly back. I wanted to be with dad when his mom died. As it turned out, I was with mom and my brothers and sister as we met with the funeral director and pastor at St. Olaf in Austin, to plan my dad's funeral.

I stayed with mom for a week or so following the service, then I flew back to California. In the subsequent days and weeks, I experienced first-hand what the Apostle Paul describes in the 26<sup>th</sup> verse from his letter to the Romans. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

That first Sunday after I was back, I wondered if I should go to church. I was president of our congregation at that time, and everyone knew about both grandma's death, and dad's. I wasn't sure I'd get through the service, be able to talk with people, including my own pastor, I was afraid I would break down in tears during what should be a joyous time, just a few days after Christmas.

I imagined sitting in a pew, desperately looking through my pockets for my tissues, trying to not distract everyone from worship. I didn't want those around me to feel uncomfortable because of my grief. I wasn't sure I either wanted or could handle the expressions of sympathy, the attempts at consolation.

And this became my personal example of the kingdom of heaven is like finding a treasure, a treasure of immeasurable, insurmountable value. God broke through my anxiety about "what if I...?" God broke through my fear of sharing tears in front of other people. I felt encouraged to go, I felt I needed to go, something deep inside me was pushing me, pulling me, to go. I needed, I desired to worship with my brothers and sisters, to hear the promise of God, to receive Holy Communion. I wanted, I needed to be surrounded by those filled with the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of heaven is like someone beset with deep grief who makes his way through the doors and into a sanctuary filled with God's people.

I didn't try to fight my grief, tears flowed as I heard God's promise in the readings, in the sacrament, in the love, the touch, the hugs of sisters and brothers who were there, who welcomed me and Cynthia, who offered their words and their touch.

Tasting the wafer and the wine, the body and blood of Christ, hearing those words, “the body of Christ given for you”, “the blood of Christ shed for you”, hearing the blessing “May the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in his grace”, was the eating and drinking of tangible hope, a precious gift, a treasure of great value.

The kingdom of heaven is like Jesus Christ reaching out for you and me through one another, giving us what we need. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that draws God’s people together, to strengthen, encourage, build up, and console one another. We know forgiveness, we are strengthened, prepared and sent to share God’s love with others, here and elsewhere, sent to share the good news of the grace of God.

In, with and under, the body of Christ is present at our table this morning. Gathered together in this place, Jesus is with us. As we partake in this meal, as we hear the Word of God preached in this place, as we sing God’s praise together, we realize that the kingdom of heaven puts everything in perspective, anxieties, fear, worry, all are powerless next to our God who has called us each by name and claimed us as His own.

AMEN