

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Romans 8:26-39

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

A few years back, our family set out on a long-anticipated vacation along the sandy white beaches of the gulf shores of Alabama. I could not wait to put my feet in the sand, beverage in hand, soaking in the sun's rays and then cool off in the emerald green waters of the Gulf. If ever would there be a perfect vacation, this was sure to be it. I was like super dad Clark Griswold trekking the family cross country to the final grand destination of Wally World. 16 hours of driving later, we arrived and settled into our hotel on the beach. I could smell the ocean air and feel the refreshing breeze sweeping in with the crashing tides upon my face. A week of surf and sun. Let the relaxation begin!

But then something we did not anticipate happened. It began to rain and rain and rain. We waited it out a few days but soon realized the tropical depression that seemed to come out of nowhere was not leaving anytime soon. Anticipation and excitement quickly turned to disappointment. It is as if we had arrived and encountered a sign that said, "Sorry folks, beach closed" just as Clark and his family did at Wally World.

Yet, Amanda quickly pivoted. I will admit she is much more adept and gifted in doing so than I am. Rather than sitting and sulking, she saw opportunity and began looking into other options. Soon, we were back in the car heading northeast to the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee. As the sun began to shine to the north the rain to the south began to fade away in the rear-view mirror.

We had never been to Chattanooga but upon our arrival it became clear we would create some new and fond memories visiting Lookout Mountain and its breath-taking scenic views in which seven states can be observed in the far-off distance and then traversing deep within the mountain to admire the hidden beauty of the nation's tallest and deepest underground waterfall, Ruby Falls. But the best was yet to come. An adventure we could have never seen growing over a week ago as we loaded up the family cruiser. The piece de resistance of our trip and one of the all-time most memorable highlights of any annual vacation. We donned our life jackets, received some basic instruction in white water rafting and soon were floating down and soaring through the rapids of the Ocoee River, the setting of world-class athletes going for gold kayaking in the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta. This seemed to be like a diamond in the rough, a treasurer to behold.

The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is somewhat like those unexpected and priceless memories now imprinted within our minds. It is like the smallest of seeds growing steadily but slowly, often even unnoticed, until one day you recognize it has become the grandest of all trees in the

forest able to hold every species of every bird on the face of the planet, or, it is like a pinch of yeast hidden in a heaping amount of flour. While the yeast sits unseen, it begins to work and in time does its magic and produces enough bread to feed hundreds of people.

I suspect if we all gave it some thought we could look back on life and see one of those golden nuggets of God's kingdom breaking in when we may have least expected it. A treasure chest hidden in a field suddenly unearthed for our eyes to see. A beautiful pearl now within reach we would give up anything to hold onto it. We would see the good news of Jesus Christ, which indeed is that hidden treasure chest and that discovered pearl, which are more important than anything we could ever purchase on earth.

I was uncertain of what I would experience in my first trip to worship with the men of Free Indeed, the newest congregation within the Southeastern Iowa Synod, planted within the walls of the Anamosa State Penitentiary. In a place I was fearful to enter with men I had no idea what I would say to ... I wondered ... what would I find? Where would God be? It didn't take long to see the seed of good news had sprouted and was beginning to reveal the kingdom of God had indeed drawn near in perhaps what I had envisioned in my mind one of the unlikeliest of places. The treasure chest filled with the good news of unconditional love and forgiveness had indeed been open wide and its richness was freeing these men from whatever it is that had confined them behind the fortified stone walls of this prison. Hope had been made manifest through the pearl of life in Christ. Men for whom society often gives up on, forget even exist, and seen by many only as criminals were now celebrating, rejoicing, and giving thanks and praise for the new life and the promised identity as children of God. No greater gift on earth is to be found.

Brothers and sisters, none of us could have imagined over four months ago the world would be caught amidst a global pandemic the likes it had never encountered before. We mourn the loss of every life, feel for every family caught in the agonizing grief of death, and weep with every person suffering the affects of this illness. It is challenging at times to trust the kingdom of God is growing even in the ugliness of this virus. It is tough to behold a beautiful pearl can be found amidst such uncertain times.

Yet, Jesus assures us it is so. He has proven life does in fact come out of death. In the words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28 NIV) We have hope because we know God is at work. COVID-19 will not hinder the kingdom of God growing in our midst. Over 40 children signed up for virtual Vacation Bible School, which is significantly more than those who attended last year. The kingdom of God is breaking in.

It is time to move beyond the fact we may not gather within the walls of the building behind me for some time and instead focus on how God might be using this time in the wilderness to shape us, grow us, refine and transform us into something new.

Rather than dwell in the unexpected rain that has spoiled our vacation, it is time to pivot to the new opportunity God has set before us. The sunshine has already and will continue to break through the clouds and the rain will be only a fleeting glimpse in the rearview mirror of our life together. There is a tree of hope, a tree of life, a tree of new beginnings continuing to grow through the handiwork of the God who planted the seed. It may seem to us now a tiny seed, nearly impossible to see, but make no doubt about it ... it has taken root and in time its abundant harvest will be so grand all the birds of air will inhabit its glorious branches and find shade in its brilliant colors of foliage.