

8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12 A
I Kings 3:5-12
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33

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I've been doing a lot of sighing lately. I'll be walking into a room, or putting away dishes, or sitting down to the computer, or reading the news, and then I'll feel it. A deep sigh I didn't know was coming. It's my body saying that, for this moment, the grief and struggle and trouble have become too much for words.

Today, many of us are sighing. We are sighing for our city. Our beautiful downtown trashed. The mayor teargassed. Military-style forces stirring up more trouble than we already had.

We're sighing for our country and our world. Virus cases spiking, leaders catching on too late, messages mixed and people divided. Lives being lost.

We're sighing for workers exposed to illness and others who are suddenly unemployed. Sighing for those pushed down by racism, and all who experience injustice.

Sighing for people we know and love, who are facing trouble or sickness.

We are sighing for this heavy time we live in. Sometimes when we try to pray, we hardly know where to begin. The words will not come. All we can do is sigh into the silence.

Yet today, blessing of blessings, God's strong and loving voice speaks back from that silence, in words from scripture that bless all of us who sigh and grow weary, exactly as if God has been reading our minds and our hearts.

A blessing comes from Romans Chapter 8: *The Spirit helps 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's it exactly! When we can't find words for all these needs, *God's Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.* God's Spirit sighs with us, and makes our sighs holy, and shapes them into prayer. From our sighs to God's heart, as the saying goes. God understands. *God's Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.*

We can rest in this blessing today. When friends or family call us up alarmed by the troops in Portland, and we don't have words, can't find words to explain what is happening or what it means... We rest in the knowledge that God intercedes for us, God intervenes for us, and we trust that somehow, in all this mess, God is working God's good purposes out, in God's good time.

That's the blessing I receive from Jesus' parables this morning. Jesus tells stories of small things growing into something much greater.

A mustard seed is tiny and insignificant, yet grows into a large bush that has the power to shelter whole families of birds building nests and raising up new generations.

A little bit of yeast, when it is carefully hidden in some dough, will make the whole batch rise, empowering a baker to feed a whole hungry community with delicious bread.

A single pearl, hidden away inside an oyster shell, slowly grows larger and more precious over time, till it is worth selling everything for.

A hidden treasure lies buried in a field, overlooked by most people, but when you find that treasure, you realize it is everything you ever wanted, everything you ever dreamed of.

The kingdom of heaven is like this, Jesus said. God's influence is like something tiny and seemingly insignificant working mysteriously and insistently to bring great abundance. The progress can be easily overlooked, but from small and hidden things God brings a whole new world.

It's a beautiful promise for today, because when life is chaotic and troubling, it can be hard to see God's influence and trust what God is up to. If we're honest, we have to admit that it doesn't always look like the reign of God is succeeding. We might feel like God has left us to our own devices. We can start to lose hope.

Yet Jesus' parables say God's purposes *are indeed* coming to life. God's good intentions are being worked out, all the time, in humble but persistent ways that are unstoppable. Like a seed that sprouts and reaches up from the soil to the sun. Like a spreading mustard weed that's practically impossible to root out from your garden, try as you might. God is bringing a new creation, and great outcomes come from small beginnings.

I read in the paper how an effort called the Black Resilience Fund started small, with just one Facebook post. In the days after George Floyd's death, Cameron Whitten had the idea to help Black Portlanders in a material way, with money for groceries and bills, and invite non-Black people to donate. With just one post on Facebook, he raised \$11,000 the first day, which he and a partner distributed carefully, writing checks at their living room coffee table. The next day, donations totaled \$55,000. In a week they raised over \$300,000. Today, the Black Resilience Fund has received over a million dollars to help meet everyday financial needs in Portland's Black community. Now there's a large team of volunteers overseeing a simple application process that's meant to help ordinary people as quickly as possible, with money for groceries, rent, car repairs, or fixing the

sink. Cameron says, “We’re not just providing financial relief. We are actually saying that Black Lives Matter, and their needs matter too.” (*Oregonian*, 7/22/20)

The kingdom of heaven is like this: Small beginnings leading to great outcomes.

US Representative John Lewis grew up in the most humble way, the son of sharecroppers in rural Alabama, in a house with no plumbing or electricity. He wanted to be a pastor and as a boy he preached to the chickens, but he didn’t really have the gift of oratory. His true gifts emerged over time, as he joined the civil rights movement and developed into a bold and determined leader. He was physically fearless, beaten many times and jailed for nonviolent protest. He was morally fearless too. In politics he stayed so stubbornly focused on justice that he was called the “conscience of Congress.” His body will soon lie in state at the US Capitol. Barack Obama said, “Generations from now, when parents teach their children what is meant by courage, the story of John Lewis will come to mind.” (*New York Times*, 7/17/20) And for all that his story amazes us now, his journey started in the smallest and humblest way, with the Holy Spirit moving his heart to serve.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: Even now, God is working in steady, persistent, humble ways, to raise up generous, courageous, loving people – to change the world.

Like the friend who stops by to check on someone who’s feeling low and saying worrisome things. A medical attendant who listens well and performs procedures gently. The employer who takes a chance on a new worker. The reporter who’s careful to get the facts right. The concerned citizen who researches the candidates to cast an informed vote. Each one is a mustard seed sprouting, a cluster of yeast expanding, a pearl taking on more luster and beauty all the time.

Dramatic miracles are not usually God’s way. As much as we’d like it, none of us expect God to swoop in and resolve Portland’s protest situation instantly. It will take cool heads and determined wills and patient, peace-loving, human-loving people to move us to a new place. We are not expecting a miracle vaccine to emerge tomorrow and instantly wipe out Covid-19-- that will take careful science, persistent research, steady funding, sustained effort, and a willing and informed public. This is how God works to redeem difficult situations. Not dramatically, but incrementally, step by redeeming step – like yeast expanding in a loaf, or seeds sprouting to fill a garden with produce. From small and sometimes hidden things, God’s kingdom comes.

When we’re living through struggles—and we are-- it’s a blessing to receive the ordinary, sustaining, everyday gifts that God gives. Like courage and strength for one more day. Like wisdom to make a good choice in the hard decision we are facing right

now. When we receive enough hope to make it one more day, we have God to thank. When someone is put in our path who can give us help or teach us something or inspire us, we have God to thank. When a few days of rest give us enough stamina to keep going, we have God to thank.

In these simple, essential ways, God's kingdom is coming, God's influence is lovingly infiltrating our world and making it new. God's encouraging, healing, peacemaking, justice-growing power is helping us not only make it through each day, but face our challenges with love and freedom and creativity and perseverance.

We've all been doing a lot of sighing lately, and God is sighing with us. But God is also breathing life into this world, all the time. God's pervasive, insistent love still lives and breathes and sighs and sings with us, every single day. And nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.