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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So, the other day, I am not even sure why...

But the other day my wife and I were looking through a book of *The Far Side* cartoons.

Does anyone here remember *The Far Side*?

For those who don't know, *The Far Side* consisted of one panel cartoons created by Gary Larson, who happens to be a Lutheran.

I'm just saying.

Now Gary Larson has this rather warped sense of humor, which is on full display in his cartoons.

In one cartoon, he depicts two deer standing and talking with each other in the woods.

The one deer is saying to other deer, "Bummer of a birthmark, Hal."

And, Hal is standing there with this bullseye-shaped birthmark on the white fur of his chest.

In another cartoon, Larson depicts two devils talking to each other in hell, as they are watching the condemned persons working amidst the flames and fire.

And the condemned persons are sweating in obvious discomfort, as they are laboring in the pit of hell.

But then there is this one guy working, pushing a wheelbarrow of rocks, and he is shown casually whistling to himself.

The two devils are watching this, and one devil says to the other, "You know, we're just not reaching that guy."

Okay, I will share one more.

In another cartoon, Larson has drawn Superman in a phone booth.

And Superman is in the midst of his quick change. He taking off his shirt and you can see the big "S" on his chest.

But while Larson depicts Superman in the midst of his quick change, he has Superman with a finger in the coin slot of the telephone looking for any quarters.

Yes, Gary Larson has a warped sense of humor.

And thank goodness he does, or many-a-person would not have had so much enjoyment reading the funny pages, when Larson was an active cartoonist.

I bring up *The Far Side*, because as I was reading the gospel lesson for today, I couldn't help but think about that book of cartoons my wife and I were paging through.

For what we find in our gospel reading is almost like a page out of Jesus' book of cartoon-like parables.

One cartoon-like parable says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed."

Another cartoon-like parable reads, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast."

Still another says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."

And still one more says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea."

You get the picture.

And that is my point.

Jesus wanted us to get the "picture."

Each little cartoon-like parable here is a little "picture" captured in words.

I guess if Jesus was a cartoonist, as opposed to a rabbi, he would have drawn panels depicting...a mustard seed growing into a large tree with birds making nests in its branches.

And he would have drawn yeast being kneaded into dough where then the dough is beginning to rise.

And Jesus would have drawn treasure buried in a field, marked with an "X", and a man going out with a shovel to dig it up.

Yes, if Jesus was a cartoonist in modern times these are some of the images we would no doubt have seen in our newspapers.

But Jesus was not a cartoonist.

He was a rabbi. He was a teacher.

And these cartoon-like parables are the way in which Jesus conveyed his message about the kingdom.

The parables are word pictures.

They are word pictures that tell us something about what God's kingdom of heaven is like.

PAUSE

Now, with that said, I don't know if Jesus' audience found his cartoon-like parables humorous.

Maybe they did.

To us, they don't strike us as humorous.

I didn't hear anyone hear bawling with laughter when I read the gospel lesson just now.

Maybe I didn't tell the parables right.

It is kind of like that joke, where a newcomer joins his friend at his friend's club for the first time.

And the members of the club are all together having lunch.

One club member at one of the tables suddenly stands up and yells “49,” and everyone in the club breaks out in laughter.

A little later another person at another table suddenly stands up and yells 14, and again everyone breaks out in uproarious laughter.

So the newcomer leans over to his friend who is a longtime member of the club and says, “What’s going on? Why are people yelling out numbers, and then everyone laughs?”

The friend explains to the newcomer, “Oh, that is how we tell jokes around here. We all know one another so well, and have heard each other’s jokes so often, that we have assigned each joke a number, and all a person needs to do is yell out a number, and people immediately think of that particular joke and they start laughing.”

The friend then tells the newcomer, “Do you want to try it? All you have to do is stand up yell a number between 1 and 100, every joke like I said has a number, 1 to 100.”

So the newcomer thinks this a great idea and he stands up and yells, “83.”

And no one in the room laughs. Not a soul.

So the newcomer sits back down again, and says to his friend, “I don’t get it. You told me that all I would have to do was say a number and they would know the joke.”

And the friend explains, “Well, yes, but some tell and a joke and some can’t.”

It might just be like that in our gospel lesson today.

Here are some of Jesus best jokes, and I am not telling them right.

But in Jesus’ day, when Jesus is speaking to the crowds, I imagine that he had them in stitches.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is small, unnoticeable, and yet it is growing all around us. The kingdom is huge like a tree. Birds are making their nests in it, and yet the powers-that-be don't even see it.

Instead the powers-that-be kill John the Baptist, and they scoff at the Son of Man, calling him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

And so the joke is on the powers-that-be.

And then Jesus tells another.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven. Same deal as the mustard seed. The kingdom is active, working to transform the entire world like leaven transforms a lump of dough, and yet the powers-that-be have not a clue as to what is going on.

Again, the joke is on them.

And Jesus tells another.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. And the kingdom is like fine pearls. The kingdom is precious. It is of great value, of greater value than all the possessions we have.

It is worth devoting our entire life to it. And yet the powers-that-be want to squash it. They want to destroy it. They want to eradicate it.

But the joke is on them.

Yes, I imagine Jesus was probably quite humorous in his day.

To what then would we compare the kingdom of heaven today?

PAUSE

The kingdom of heaven is Clorox wipes, that someone seeks out day-in and day-out at the grocery store and at the wholesale club. And when that someone does find Clorox wipes, they are overjoyed, and they rejoice, such that they buy two, or three, or as many as they are allowed.

That parable is almost funny, if it weren't our present reality.

The kingdom of heaven is also like a facemask, whereby before they were small in number, where only few were to be found.

They were hard to come; only a select few seemed could get their hands on one.

But since then they have become ubiquitous. They are everywhere, and many-a-person has even taken to making them and giving them away. They have become the perfect gift for someone.

Again, that is almost funny, if it weren't so close to home.

The kingdom of heaven is also like a vaccine that when it is taken gives a person a new lease on life, such that they can intermingle, and sing, and embrace, and experience life to its fullest.

Yes, to what would we compare the kingdom of heaven today?

The kingdom of heaven is like a group of people marching and protesting peaceably for social change.

The kingdom of heaven is like a police force that honorably performs their duties for the well-fare of all people.

The kingdom is like people who care for each other.

It is like people who are responsible for each other, who are accountable to each other.

It is like people who give of themselves for the other person.

It is like people who don't weigh the costs before they offer their support.

The kingdom of heaven is like all of these things.

But if we had to say it in one word.

The kingdom of heaven is like, no not like...

The kingdom of heaven is grace.

Need I say any more than that?

The kingdom of heaven is grace.

Grace is each thing of creation doing what God had intended each thing to be doing.

Grace is each thing sharing what it is with the world.

Grace is the plant that produces a flower for us to look at and to smell, and for the bee to visit and pollinate. That is grace.

Grace is a flower that shares what it is with the world.

And grace is the sun that shines its rays upon us to give us light and warmth and to provide food for the plant through photosynthesis. That is grace.

Grace is the sun that shares what it is with the world.

And grace is the cloud that waters the earth that living things might quench their thirst. That is grace.

Grace is the cloud that shares what it is with the world.

And grace is also the human being who tends to the well-being of other human beings, and who tends to the well-being of creation, that all of the human family and all of creation suffer no harm. That is grace.

Grace is the human being that shares what it is with the world.

We see this type of grace, we see human grace in the person who best exemplified sharing who he was with the world.

Human grace was embodied in Christ, who shared his life that the world might know new life.

Human grace was embodied in Christ, who shared his life that you and I might know the promised resurrection.

Grace is each thing in creation sharing what that thing is with the world.

And, most especially, God in Jesus Christ is “grace” incarnate.

God shared what God is with the world by coming into the world in the person of his Son.

PAUSE

Yes, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, yeast, a net, and so on because those things share what they are—a mustard seed shares itself as a tree for birds, yeast shares what it is for bread to rise, a net shares what it is for the catching of fish.

That is the kingdom of God, it is grace, it is each thing sharing what it is for the sake of the world, it is each thing being an animated parable.

PAUSE

And so, brothers and sisters in Christ, God is calling us to share what each one of us is for the sake of the world.

God is calling us to be grace, as we have seen what grace is in Jesus, a self-giving love for the other person.

The kingdom of heaven is the animated parable, the parable come-to-life.

The kingdom of heaven IS you and me sharing ourselves with the world, sharing ourselves for the blessing of the neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen.