

Trinity Church
July 27, 2008

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year a, Proper 12

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Glory in God's Holy Name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Amen.*

On a warm fall evening several years ago, Debbie and I were having an early dinner in a trattoria in the neighborhood of Rome called Trastevere. Trastevere means "over the river," but what it connotes to Romans is what we think when we say "the wrong side of the tracks." In the apostle Paul's day, it was a slum. Today it is a student neighborhood of inexpensive cafes and shops, bookstores, pubs, and rowdy behavior.

Some historians think that Rome's earliest Christians may have lived in this neighborhood, so as we sat out in the evening air, I kept thinking, "I wonder if the Christians who first read Paul's Letter to the Romans lived here, gathered for worship maybe just a few doors down this or that street."

And what a Letter! "The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. In Christ Jesus you are glorified." "God is for us — who can stand against us?" "I am convinced that there is no thing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amazing words to which generations of Christians cling for hope and confidence.

Now, just to be clear: Paul isn't saying everything goes well for Christians. We know that that isn't true for any of us who believe. Paul's electrifying message is that the end of all things has been revealed in Christ's death and resurrection, and that no difficulty, even death itself, can separate us from the coming together of all things in the Risen Christ, who is God's insatiable love for us. And, Paul says, that end of all things in God's love has already begun among those who are Christ's body, among us.

Jesus is the one who points out in his parables the irony of this reality. "The kingdom of heaven," as Jesus calls it, is a big deal. An immense reality. The coming together of all things in Christ, to use Paul's words, is an equally large concept. This high and important reality, Jesus insists, comes to us in small and seemingly powerless ways that can be easily dismissed. The truth behind these small ways of energizing the kingdom is known to us by faith.

It is like the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed, that holds within itself a whole tree. It is like yeast in dough, unseen, yet transforming the bread. It is like one fine pearl among many, that must be sought out, or like a treasure buried in a field that a lucky man finds by accident. Such a small thing demands our whole life. In the end, Jesus says, the net of this reality will gather up every fish in the sea, every soul in the universe, and all will be eternally loved by God in resurrection and life.

We can count on these small revelations of God's kingdom in Christ becoming all-in-all; and God will not leave us out. Jacob shows us this faithfulness in love as he labors seven years for his beloved Rachel, only to be deceived into marriage with Leah, but then labors seven more years in faithfulness for Rachel. No matter what, Jacob will not let his love for Rachel be denied. So God, no matter what, will not let God's love for us be denied. God will have us as his beloved forever. God is faithful.

Today we celebrate four baptisms: Caroline, Alexander, Benjamin and Grayson are buried with Christ in a death like his in order to be raised with Christ in a resurrection like his. Such a big thing in so simple and so small an act. Poured water and a few words and the seal of Christ, that Spirit that intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. This simple sacrament unlocks for us the high reality of God's kingdom and of each of these children as an inseparable part of God's love making the whole creation new. Marked as Christ's own and sealed forever, Christ's life is at work in them now. Christ in them as a small seed, a bit of leaven, a priceless pearl, a hidden treasure, and Christ will grow up in them an irresistible love.

Debbie and I weren't in Trastevere by accident on that fall evening some years ago. We were on our way to the ancient church of Santa Maria in Trastevere. No archaeology has been done there, but some think that if it were, one of the earliest house churches in Rome would be unearthed, perhaps even the place where Paul's Letter to the Romans was received. That was 2000 years ago, but we were there to meet today's Christians in this ancient city. We entered the church and the baptized were already gathering in small groups, talking and praying together. By seven, the church was full, several hundred, as it is every day of the week. After 30 minutes of prayer, singing, and a reading from Scripture, a few announcements were made, and then the congregation assembled in groups around various ministries. This gathering is called the Sant' Egidio society, named after a medieval saint – Giles, whose very small church is nearby. The group that gathered there twenty years ago is now far too large to meet there or in Santa Maria for that matter, if they all came at once. This group of Roman laity desire only to live out the kingdom of God as baptized Christians. They feed all the homeless in Rome, they run free clinics, they provide low cost housing, they do marriage counseling, they provide Bible study for those who seek a deeper relationship with Christ, they prepare people for baptism, they are agents of reconciliation in work disputes and other conflicts. And they come together every day, as they are able, for prayer in Trastevere. A powerful witness in so ancient a place of how a seed planted so long ago has grown into a great tree of love.

And isn't that seed, that yeast, that pearl, that treasure, is it not here in this place, in these children, in our common life, as it is in thousands and thousands of places where Christ is made known in worship and prayer on this Sunday?

So small a sacrament, so simple an act, so rich a blessing, so precious are these children to God. Amen.