

Sermon
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 20th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [GENESIS 45:1-15; PSALM 133; ROMANS 11:1-2A, 29-32; MATTHEW 15:\(10-20\) 21-28](#)

Living God's Future Now is a series of online seminars from the HeartEdge Network, an ecumenical network and movement for church renewal. In one of these seminars, Sam Wells and Walter Brueggeman have a conversation – unscripted – about “what it means to improvise God’s Kingdom”.

Improvising. Are we improvising God’s Kingdom? What could this mean? One of Sam Wells’ many books is: “Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics”. In it, he says this:

“Improvisation in the theater is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.”

Doesn’t this sound like life? Life is about developing trust in God, in self, and in relationships. It’s about making choices and striving to participate freely and without fear in this unscripted drama of life.

One of the things Walter Brueggeman talked about in this conversation with Sam Wells was “God’s freedom”: God is a real player in this drama of creation. This reminds me of Desmond Tutu’s assertion that:

“God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot.” (Desmond Tutu)

It also reminds me of one of my favourite phrases from Bruce Epperly: “God wants partners not puppets”.

The drama of life – the drama of creation – is about *trust*. It’s about *connection*, and about *partnership* and *participation*.

Embracing that God without us won’t and that we without God can’t, asks us to think about the kind of God we believe in. What kind of God are we partnering with? What kind of God are we embodying? Scripture is full of stories of God and humanity “improvising God’s Kingdom” together, and our readings this morning certainly offer us this!

Trust, connection, partnership, participation, and the kind of God we believe in and embody – these are themes that wind their way through our readings this morning. “Improvising God’s kingdom”: how did God and Joseph and his brothers improvise God’s Kingdom together? How was Paul improvising God’s Kingdom in his Letter to the Romans? What do the Pharisees have to show us

about improvising God's Kingdom? And the Canaanite woman? What does her improvising invite us to consider in our own improvising of God's Kingdom?

Our passage from Genesis this morning brings to a close a long, messy story of family dysfunction with Joseph and his brothers. There is living word for us as we see how Joseph chooses to participate with God at the end of this story – how he improvises God's Kingdom. Joseph could have chosen to embody a wrathful God, seeking revenge on his brothers. He might have chosen harsh judgement, and ongoing hatred. He doesn't, though!

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister said this:

“Until I discover the God in which I believe, I will never understand another thing about my own life. If my God is harsh judge, I will live in unquenchable guilt. If my God is Holy Nothingness, I will live a life of cosmic loneliness. If my God is taunt and bully, I will live my life impaled on the pin of a grinning giant. If my God is life and hope, I will live my life in fullness overflowing forever.”¹

Joseph chooses to participate with God by embodying life and hope. He chooses relationship. He says to his brothers “come closer” and chooses connection. He trusts that God has sent him to Egypt to preserve life. This story

¹ Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori Publications: 1999), 20–21, 22. In R Rohr's daily reflections (30 11 21).

shows us a loving God, who wants us to choose relationship and connection as this drama of life unfolds, and as we “improvise God’s Kingdom”.

Our reading from Romans. These chapters in Romans – chapters 9, 10, and 11 – are Paul working hard to imagine and express what God is doing through Jesus. In the very next verse that follows what we heard this morning Paul writes: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Romans 11: 33) And then: “For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever!” This expresses a deep and abiding trust in God. Paul is participating with a faithful, consistent, trustworthy God who does not reject God’s people. As we participate with God in this drama of life, in this improvising of God’s kingdom, we are invited to trust in God’s goodness and mercy, in God’s endless, boundless love. And we are invited to embody that goodness and mercy and love in our actions.

Our participation with God in improvising God’s kingdom involves deep thinking and questioning, though. We wouldn’t have chapters 9-11 if Paul hadn’t wrestled with the mystery of God. This guides us in our own participation with God. We can and should ask questions. Paul didn’t rush immediately to handing it over to the mystery of God, and neither are we to do that!

And then, our Gospel passage. We have to be careful with these first verses. This is not a condemnation of the Pharisees, but rather an invitation to see that there is potential and possibility for fuller, deeper, more active participation in this life than a blind following of the law offers. We need to be aware of the correlation between what is in our hearts and our behaviour. We need to be clear on the kind of God we are embodying and participating with in this life. This is what Jesus is inviting those gathered, and us, into here.

We move from these verses to the encounter with the Canaanite woman. There is a different version of this story in Mark's Gospel, and both are uncomfortable.

Various interpretations of this text focus on Jesus having made his way into "Gentile" territory, and explain his reference to the "children's food" as a reference to the children of Israel, which makes "the dogs" all other peoples, including the Canaanite woman. Jesus's reasons for saying what he said are interpreted in different ways. Was he testing the woman to tease out her affirmation of faith? Are we seeing the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, or perhaps not yet understanding the scope of his own mission? Did his conversation with her change his mind? I have never really been satisfied with any of these explanations.

What if we zoom in on how the Canaanite woman was participating with God in this story, though. What if we consider that her persistence shows us the kind of God she believed in. What if we look at this an example of “improvising God’s Kingdom”?

That woman was improvising God’s Kingdom with her persistence, and that persistence brought change: healing for her daughter. Where did that boldness come from? It came from her knowing the kind of God that she believed in: a loving God, who could bring healing and wholeness. Her boldness, her persistence came from trust in that love, and trusting that Jesus would embody it, that he would participate with her in bringing healing for her daughter.

We have to be careful not to go down a path of thinking that persistence will bring us all we are hoping or longing for. Improvising God’s Kingdom isn’t about finding a formula that will work just the way we want it to every time. It’s a way of being in the world. It’s a way of navigating all the ups and downs of this life. As I said earlier, it’s about developing trust in God, in self, and in relationships. It’s about making choices and striving to participate freely and without fear in this unscripted drama of life.

Church has the potential to be a place where this trust is deepened and encouraged. It's a place where we can wrestle with the mystery of God, but also be reminded that a God of life and hope is relentlessly inviting us into relationship, forever. A God of boundless, endless love is inviting us to embody that love. May we all soak in that love in our prayer and song and sacrament this morning. May we leave here refreshed and restored, and prepared to improvise God's Kingdom, in Jesus name. Amen.