

July 26, 2020 – “When Negativity Don’t Pull You Through” – Rev Mike Eggleston, St Ben’s Episcopal

Thanks to St Benedict’s for giving me two new life experiences today. This is my first time ever to preach wearing a mask. It’s also my first time to preach while being video-recorded live. Actually, I’ve done one more fairly new thing this week in preparation, which was to read a book, way outside my wheelhouse. Most of what I read is ecology or theology or world fiction. But the book I’ll lead from today was critical of environmentalists and even more so of religious folks and it definitely wasn’t fiction. The book is Enlightenment Now, written by Dr. Stephen Pinker. If that title makes you think it’s about attaining one’s Buddha nature, think again. The subtitle is “The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress.” The book is a 500-page defense of how 18th century enlightenment values, namely reason, science, humanism, have made human life remarkably better.

Stephen Pinker includes over 60 graphs, showing how human life span has more than doubled since enlightenment ideas took hold, and how the world-wide standard of living has gone up exponentially. He asks some eye-opening questions. For example, how many hours of labor would it have cost us in 1800 to buy a bicycle, or a refrigerator, or a photo of our grandchildren? The answer is you could have worked a whole lifetime and never earned enough, because they weren’t invented yet, but those things and so much more has come courtesy of the enlightenment. Pinker notes that if people today liked to read good news instead of bad, than the lead headline in the New York Times would be “Today the number of people in poverty in the world dropped by 137,000 people.” And here’s the punchline. Pinker, writing in 2018, says that the same headline, poverty down by 137 thousand today, could be the banner in the Times every day for the last 37 years.

But we are more drawn to bad news than to wonderful. Any one of us could choose to press the little button not far from the top of my MSN news feed which says “Good news today,” But I don’t open that file and I’ll bet you don’t either. Instead, I go first to the heart-breaking little tabs that say, politics or coronavirus. And my blood pressure goes up while my hope for the world goes down. Why? Why do some of us, OK, many of us, have a bias toward focusing on the downside? Pinker claims that most of us, oddly the more so as we grow more educated and affluent and long-lived, do tend to lean toward the bad news. Disagree if you will, but he makes plausible arguments about why that is so. Answer this, he suggests. What could you imagine that could make your life and world much better? Well, one could imagine some incremental improvements. A vaccine. A fair election with no vote suppression. Renewable energy everywhere. Grandchildren. Not a bad list. But then Pinker and other cognitive scientists ask us to imagine what could make our life and world much worse. And it’s hello, bottomless pit. We can imagine a lot more that would make life worse than better. Plus, thank you for mentioning this, Dr Pinker. We who have lived, say, 71 years have less time still to live on earth than we did at 17. So looking at our own aches and pains and actuarial projections, we are susceptible to thinking that the whole world is getting worse. It isn’t, says Pinker. Our last three centuries dancing with the enlightenment values of reason, science, and humanism have brought tremendous gains to the quality of human life. Across the planet.

All this, oddly, brought to my mind the opening words of a Bob Dylan blues song from many years ago. The song is named “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues.” Nina Simone covered it too. The opening line is “When you’re lost in the rain in Jaurez, and it’s Eastertime too. And your gravity fails

and negativity don't pull you through." Do those last five words ring a bell in your psyche as they do in mine? "Negativity don't pull you through." It don't, it won't, it can't. Oh, negativity is a defense mechanism which can get us through some low grade, garden variety woes. Negativity is the voice in one's mind which says, "I knew my team was going to lose. I knew he wouldn't call, she wouldn't listen." Negativity says, "Anything that can go wrong will. Bad things happen." Negativity can pull us through some disappointments, sort of. But when it's really crunch time, negativity don't pull you through. When you call the paramedics, when you're in the hospital before emergency surgery, when there's a squeal of tires and sounds of metal crashing right ahead of you and adrenaline floods your body and you're driving more alert than ever before, it's not negativity that that gets us through. And in today's America, it's not negativity that we need now. It's powerful hope and action.

Which brings me from Pinker to Jesus as we read five of his short parables today. These parables are the most common type of parables we have from Jesus. They're often called parables of the kingdom. I prefer the translation you often use here by dropping just one letter G. The kin-dom of God. I think Paul would prefer that translation too. His eighth chapter of Romans keeps saying we are children of God, children of God in one family, and that means kin-dom of God. But first we have Matthew 13, five short parables of the kin-dom. Have you noticed that Jesus is about the most positive, most hopeful human who ever walked this planet? The kin-dom, kingdom, realm of God, is at hand, here among us and within us, That's astonishing good news.

What is this at-hand realm of God like? Well, it's like a mustard seed, smallest of all seeds, which grows before you hardly know it into a big old bush and the birds shelter in its branches. At first glance that parable is very clear in its meaning. Small things, mustard seeds, become great. But look a little deeper at a second level of this parable. Do you really want big old mustard bushes in your yard? No, here you tear out Sahara mustard wherever you can, that invasive rapacious species. In my garden, I planted a few good mustard seedlings my first year and they were beautiful but they took over everything and tasted too strong to eat, so I've never planted any again. Jewish teachings in the Mishnah 170 years after Jesus said never plant mustard seeds in your garden. "It is hard," Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan points out, to escape the conclusion that Jesus deliberately compares the kingdom of God to a weed." And those birds that it attracts? Tell me, farmers among us, do you really want birds in your grain fields." I think that's a no.

Next parable. Very similar. God's kin-dom is like a woman, who takes a little bit of leaven, hides in it a lot of flour, and soon it's all leavened" Great. Small things make the bread rise and so tasty, plus if you do it right you save some leaven for the next batch and can share it with your neighbors. Wonderful. But there's something unsavoury about this parable too. For one thing, leaven was for Judaism a symbol of moral corruption. It's a mold, a fungus. You get every trace out of your house at spring-cleaning at Passover. How about that, says Crossan. Jesus seems to be preaching a kingdom of undesirables.

Next parable. The kin-dom of God is like a rich merchant, who finds a pearl so perfect that he sells all that he has and buys that pearl. OK, the king-dom of God is exquisite, once you've seen it you'd leave everything to have it. Great. But again there's this flip side. Hmm. Now the merchant who had everything has nothing left except one pearl the size of his pinkie. What's he going to eat?

What's he going to wear? One pearl? What does he tell his wife and children? Would you hire an investment manager who says forget diversifying? Sell everything for this one lottery ticket? Hmm. The kingdom of exquisite, but it sure does make one rich guy act crazy.

No, make that two rich guys. For the next parable says God's realm is like a treasure in a field, which a man apparently digging on someone else's land finds and covers up and sells all that he has to buy that field. Again, there's something strange about this parable. Putting all your eggs in one's basket? Plus, prospecting in a field which doesn't belong to you but to someone else, and then hiding the treasure you can buy it before someone else knows what she lost? Some might call it trespassing

Well, finally the last parable of the kin-dom here is above suspicion. Fortunate fishermen make a fantabulous catch. The kingdom of God is like fishermen who haul in every kind of fish in their nets. So they do what anyone would do. They haul all the fish ashore, put the good fish in baskets to sell, but the bad fish they throw away. OK. But isn't there something fishy here too?. Why waste any fish? At worst, use the untasty ones for fertilizer. Even more, the interpretation attached to the end of this parable troubles us. The angels will separate the righteous from the evil humans and throw the evil into the furnace of fire? Ow. That burns. Preacher, why are you pointing out the negative side of these parables, especially when you just said negativity gets us nowhere? Well, what I hope is what we'll see here is not a negative message but actually two positive ones.

The first positive message is that God's kin-dom is wondrous. It's like the little seed that becomes great, like leaven that raises the bread, like a perfect pearl, like treasure, like the best day fishing you've ever had. The second message is also positive. The kin-ship of God can be found in very unlikely places. The realm of God is there in the weeds and in the crows that eat your corn. The realm of God is even in mold if you use it right. The kin-ship of God is at work in crazy rich men and maybe even with trespassors. The kin-dom of God is there among wasteful fishermen, or maybe in medical workers having to practice triage. The realm of God is magnificent, it's as near as the blink of an eye, and you might just see it in the unlikeliest of places. Try it. Look around sometime this week. And think. Where is God's love to be found even in things that get me down?

Briefly now, go to one of the most influential parts of our Bibles, Romans 8. Only brave or foolish pastors choose to preach from Romans 7 and 8. I'm not brave, but I am foolish enough to try to be a chicken here pecking at Romans 8 to find some grains of hope for us here. That's not hard.

I see at least two mustard seeds here in Romans 8.26-30. One. The Holy Spirit helps us pray when we don't know how or what to pray. There's a curious thing that evidently happened in the Roman church, or in whatever Christian community Paul was sending this letter from. What's curious is that those early Christians were praying without words sometimes. They weren't exactly praying in tongues like some Christian communities were, especially in Corinth. The Christians in Romans were praying, Paul says, in sighs and groans too deep for words. The whole creation is groaning as though in labor pains, he says. Does that speak to you? It might. One of my oldest friends in a zoom conversation last Thursday said that when she had a cardiac arrest and died a few years ago, when the medical team shocked and pounded her back to life, she was conscious through a lot of that, she said. She was conscious of howling like an animal during the pain. But she was also conscious of feeling a deep peace, in which she was aware that her long-deceased mother and maybe other

kindred too were present conveying a deep love even as she screamed and came back to life. I don't know, I've never had that. But I have groaned in prayer when words ran out, and help came from an unexpected source, not in human words. I get kidney stones sometimes. Evidently not very bit ones, but big enough that before getting to the emergency room I'm crawling on the floor just outside the bathroom and groaning. Twice now when I've been like that my oldest cat has come to my side. Normally he doesn't do much except sleep on the bed or in the sunlight. But I'll never forget how when no one else was near, my old cat jumped down alongside me. He just kind of sniffed at me a little, touched a paw, then molded himself close, and mewed something soft and comforting. It didn't keep me from having to go to emergency where the doctors did their wonders. But I won't forget. I've prayed like in Romans 8 a groaning prayer when words just could not do it. And Bart the cat, Bartholomew, seemed to me to pray a loving, pain-soothing cat prayer.

The point being: God's Spirit comes to our help when we really need to pray. Sometimes it's without human words. The greatest gift of the Spirit, remember, is love. That's probably the truest test of the Spirit. If it's the Holy Spirit, it's loving. If it's not loving, it may not be God's Spirit.

The last grain I'll glean today from Romans 8 comes down to one word. "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord?" Well, that's 12 words, too many now. But if that's true as Paul says, that all things work together for good through Christ, than the proper response I think is one word: gratitude. Negativity can't get you through. Gratitude can. Amen.