

Dear friends in Christ,

**It has been a hard year.** The coronavirus pandemic, now surging across much of the country; the terrible killing of George Floyd and other African-Americans; protests for justice for people of color; the impeachment trial of the president; a good economy followed by the shutdown and huge job losses; democracy being threatened in Hong Kong; a plague of locusts in Africa, fires in Australia, and more.

**Is there hope in the midst of the suffering? Can we find anything good in the midst of all this?** Are there any gifts we can find amid all the bad news? In the Gospel for Sunday, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45, and in the reading from Romans 8:26-39, God is the great giver. But the gifts are not always apparent: in Matthew, a mustard seed, yeast in the dough, a buried treasure; in Romans, coming in our weakness, in the midst of hardship and distress, and in Christ's dying for us. This tells us of a generous God who gives us many gifts even in unexpected circumstances.

**In the context of all the bad news of this year, it can seem unusual to hear about God's gifts.** As St. Paul says earlier in Romans 8, the creation is groaning, eagerly longing for liberation from the weight of generations of human indifference and sin. But even in this field of sorrow, the mustard seed of God's Kingdom is growing, and it will eventually shelter the birds and their nests in its branches. Even in the field of our present-day world, the treasure of God's kingdom is waiting to be discovered. **The Good News of God's reconciling love in Christ, of the belovedness of God's children of all races, of the freedom to trust God and love one another, is hidden even here in our time and place.** Our sin and the sin of people over time has caused great brokenness and pain, but God comes to forgive and to heal.

**In Romans 8, Paul writes, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"** (Romans 8:35, 37). We are "more than conquerors" because we are inseparably connected to Christ. Nothing can break that attachment. In spite of our sin, God loves us completely. God loved us so much that He gave His own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die to forgive our sin, and God raised Him from the dead to give us new life.

**God's Kingdom, the life-giving presence and rule of God in our lives in this world, grows into a large tree where many can find shelter.** The Kingdom is like yeast that permeates the dough, transforming all it comes in contact with. The Kingdom of God inspires people to give anything and everything to obtain it, and it gives them incredible joy. **God's kingdom opens us up to life in this world---**to a life of gratitude, to a life dedicated to showing mercy to others, to a life advocating for justice for all people, to a life of caring for our neighbors responsibly, and protecting those who are vulnerable.

Yes, we have been facing a deadly once-in-a hundred-years pandemic, dealing with a plague of racial injustice, confronting political and economic distress, and enduring weariness and great uncertainty. **But God comes bringing gifts to us in the midst of all this--gifts of reconciliation for people of all races, the freedom to trust God and to love our neighbors, forgiveness, healing, and an abiding love that will never let us go.**

In Christ's unshakeable love,

Pastor Steve