

This Treasure, This Mystery**Rev. Amanda Hatfield Moore**

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Church of the Covenant

Installation of Daniel Harrison

How is it possible that we can all be looking at the same thing and yet see totally different things? On the surface it doesn't make any sense, and yet this is one of the fundamental truths of human nature. Whatever it is that we're looking at, what we see is colored by context: our feelings, our experiences, our relationships, our strengths and our vulnerabilities. In these divided times all we have to do is turn on the TV or peer into the internet to find people seeing all kinds of things both reasonable and unreasonable. Though really, to see this truth in action we don't really have to look any farther than our own lives inside this vast and baffling thing we call the Church.

What is the Church? We can all supply more or less orthodox answers: the Church is a banding together of Christians, for mutual support and growth, and for shared service in God's world. But those who stand on the outside, who do they say that we are? To those who have been oppressed, excluded, demonized, shouted down, and ignored, the Church is a tower of privilege, a wielder of enormous and undeserved power. The Church builds forts, builds weapons out of those great big unassailable words like Tradition and Values and Biblical, and we always—isn't it convenient?—find some reason to back up the status quo.

We've all heard these criticisms, and they're not pleasant, though I think we all know those outsiders have a point. We'd like to be given the benefit of the doubt, we'd like to be personally considered innocent until proven guilty, but we also understand why, at this late day, that kind of charity is in short supply.

But, all right, we who stand on the inside, we who have passed through the waters of Baptism and gathered around the Table, what do we say the Church is? Sometimes you will hear people say—The Church saved my life. The Church is my family; the Church is the only place where I am fully accepted, the Church is where I met God, where I embraced forgiveness and abundance and resurrection. The Church is on the move; the Church is carrying the Gospel out where it most

needs to be; the Church is a powerful force for good because we move with God.

Sometimes we say that, but not every time. Sometimes we say—The Church? Well, the food is good, I guess, and there's that charity project we do every year—you know, the one. But the Church has broken my heart; the Church is where all my frustration lives; I am wearied to death by the pettiness, the laziness, the fear, and I fear the consequences of toxic relationships and power struggles. And I wish we had more kids around, and sometimes I just—What are we even doing?

The Church gives life; the Church saps life. You will hear Christians say both of these things, and I will tell you something even stranger: sometimes you will hear the same Christians say these things, depending on whether it's Monday or Tuesday.

How can people look at the same thing and yet see so many different things? I'm sure that every person in here could tell me a different story of Church of the Covenant. As you stand on the edge of this new chapter in your life together, you are probably seeing all kinds of things. Because the plain truth is that life in the Church is a shifting sort of thing. It's a multi-faceted thing, and what we see depends on who we are and where we are and where we've been. Living together the way we do is difficult and complicated, and of course there are times when we look around or look within and don't particularly like what we see.

But to be gathered together in faith means that we are also gathered in hope, and choosing faith means that we are also choosing joy. And it is with faith and hope and joy that we choose to celebrate one more beginning at Church of the Covenant.

Today is a day to celebrate the Church, in spite of all its failings. We celebrate that God is with us, and that somehow in spite of ourselves God is going to work with us and through us until God's promises are fulfilled. Now we are surrounded by mystery—and really 'mystery' is the charitable word for it—but it is also true that we are surrounded by holiness and new life and all the treasures of God.

Mystery and treasure, different ways of seeing and questions answered with

more questions—we see this tension perfectly in these short parables Jesus tells in Matthew chapter thirteen. All of them are looking at one thing, the Kingdom of Heaven, and yet each parable sees something different: a mustard seed, a woman hiding yeasts in flour, a buried treasure, a merchant searching for pearls, a net full of fish. Just a sentence or two each, and yet generations and generations of conversation, and pages and pages written: what exactly did Jesus mean, and what does it mean for us?

There is no such thing as a mustard tree. There are mustard plants, there are mustard bushes, they can be tall-ish, but they're not trees. So is Jesus talking about a miracle whereby some particular mustard seed does manage to grow into a tree, is he making a straightforward point about small beginnings leading to great things? Or is he gently poking fun at our idea that something has to be big and grand in order to be important, is he saying that the Kingdom of Heaven really is more like a shrub than a towering, imperial tree?

Is it significant that mustard was almost considered a weed in the ancient world; that it grew freely everywhere and was just about impossible to get out of the garden once it took root? In the same way, is it significant that yeast was considered corrosive in the ancient world—necessary for life, but always just a little bit gross? And why is the woman hiding the yeast in the flour, and what does it mean that with three measures of flour she's going to wind up with enough bread to feed over a hundred people?

Is discipleship about being surprised by God, stumbling across treasure when it was the last thing on our minds? Or is it about devoting our whole selves to the search for what is most precious? Does discipleship require from us the courage to give up everything we have, or is discipleship the freedom that comes when we finally allow ourselves to stop searching, is discipleship the change that comes upon us when we finally say—I have enough, I have what's important?

Are we here to build an Empire that will reign over all other empires, or does our knowledge of the cross and the empty tomb show us that power is always an illusion? Does God come to us in the beauty and harmony of a world created good, or does God come into the chaos of our difficult lives turned upside

down one more time?

Well, you can probably guess what I'm going to say. It all has the potential to be true, depending on what day it is, depending on where we're standing. We live surrounded by mystery; we live surrounded by everything we don't know. But we are also living surrounded by treasure. Whatever we're looking at, we can be touched and comforted and led forward by God. Whatever road we're standing on, there is a way to walk it in discipleship.

Church of the Covenant, Sisters and Brothers, Dear People of God, your treasure and mystery is this: Life will go on, but at the same time life can't go on. God blesses us with continuity, but God is also calling us into cataclysm.

I know you hear that call, I know that when you stand at the Church's door and look out you are seeing fearsome things. And I believe that this potent combination of the faith we affirm and the reality that presently surrounds us means that we the Church are being called into unprecedented action. Everything that we said was impossible, everything that we said was too difficult, too aggressive, too divisive—we need to put it all back on the table and re-evaluate. The whole world is crying out, we can't do only what we have done before. We must do better, we must finally put right every wrong we've ever shrugged off and dismissed by saying 'that's just the way things are.' It's time and past time for things to happen in the Church that have never happened before. It's time and past time for us to open ourselves up to a new kind of sincerity, a new and deeper whole-heartedness.

And here's the good news: you've got the right pastor for that. Daniel is an expert in doing what hasn't been done before, and I have never known him to be short on ideas. You're in good hands, but even so this isn't an easy thing you're about to do, this beginning of a new phase of ministry. So—as a friend, because I care—I'm going to attempt to do a little pre-emptive mediation here.

Daniel: I hate to tell you this, but here's the truth: sometimes the last thing we Church people actually want is someone coming in and expecting that we live up to our baptisms and be completely what we're supposed to be.

Church: There will probably be days when Daniel is driving you up the wall,

when you think he's moving way too fast and asking way too much.

Daniel: There might be times when the Church is right about that.

But—everybody—through it all you will be living this life together. So when these conversations happen, just talk it through, and decide together. And no matter what don't get bogged down into one of those great big Church messes where it's about everything except what it's actually about. Just keep talking to each other, and it will be all right.

Because here's the rest of the good news: even now, even in these challenging days, even in this season of change, your life together will continue. There will always be questions, there will always be troubles, there will probably be a whole series of crossroads, but still there will be this congregational life. You will walk with God in worship, study, and prayer. You will walk with each other in fellowship through all the ups and downs of life; you will celebrate together and you will cry together. And you will keep figuring out how to love each other, and you will keep figuring out how to be disciples, in large ways and in small ways.

So there will be days when we're waiting confidently for God's miraculous mustard tree to show up, and there will be days we realize we're perfectly fine as the shrubs we are. We'll have to decide how to respond when God blindsides us with buried treasure, and we'll have to decide what is the one thing more important than everything else, and we will discover in new ways the peace of already having what matters most. And some days it will feel like we're all just tangled up in a net waiting for God to come and sort us out, but that's okay too, because just like yeast in flour, everything that is hidden will be revealed.

There will always be mystery—mystery being the charitable word for all our wanderings and all our wonderings—but we can know with perfect peace and joy that we are also surrounded by treasure. The Kingdom of Heaven is on the way; the Kingdom of Heaven is already here. Whatever else comes, God will be with us, and we will live together.

Let us pray:

God of old promises, God of new beginnings, rain down your blessings on Church of the Covenant now as they enter into this new chapter of ministry; may they serve you boldly and live together joyfully, whatever the future may bring. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-48