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It started during the World Cup when Team USA won a match and the stadium played what was supposed to be their victory song. But, when everyone heard the notes and words of, *Take Me Home Country Roads*, everyone – and I mean everyone in the stadium– sang along. It didn't matter which team a person had been rooting for, or where someone lived or what country they were from; everyone knew the words and everyone sang along. The togetherness the song created wasn't celebrating a victory of one soccer team or country over another, it was celebrating the special joy when people from different places, backgrounds, different ideals and politics can find a commonality that causes all those divisions to melt away into a song about belonging. It became one of the highlights of the World Cup and had folks from other countries rooting for the USA just so they could sing that song together again. For US citizens, it was like good medicine that reminds us there is more to the United States than politics and our political leaders, and despite the unjust things happening, there is still beauty and good people in our country, and we still have the capacity to experience joy, connection to something larger than self. And – it goes without saying - ranch dressing.

That was not the end of what is turning into what I call a Country Roads Summer. A few weeks ago, during a weather delay at a Chicago Cubs game, the fans in Wriggly Field spontaneously began singing *Take Me Home, Country Roads*. And just like in the World Cup, it didn't matter what team the fans were rooting for, divisions melted away as everyone sang along, reached for each other and swayed to the music together in pure joy.

That's when news shows across the country took notice and sent reporters to talk to one of the song's writers, Bill Danoff, about its origin some 5 and a half decades ago. CBS Morning Show did a special feature on how *Take Me Home Country Roads* was a collaborative effort and how one of its songwriters, singer John Denver sang it all over the world. During the Cold War, John Denver was one of the few Western artists allowed to perform in countries like Russia and China, which is probably why to this day people from all over the world can sing *Take Me Home Country Roads* word for word, no matter what language they speak.

And while the World Cup is over, the joy of the song continues. A few days ago, on the TV show *America's Got Talent*, a father and son band from Romeo, Michigan called The Sound sang *Take Me Home Country Roads*, beginning it the way John Denver himself often did in concert, inviting the audience to clap and sing along. Suddenly it didn't matter what kind of music the audience wanted or liked, judges, security guards, staff, and every audience member clapped and sang along. Even Simon Cowell the stickler judge couldn't stop himself from singing along and his only criticism was calling the song a "safe" choice. Then again, there is something beautifully inclusive – like a net that draws everyone in - about a song everyone can sing, and everyone knows, especially a song about belonging, coming home, something almost like God's Kingdom of Heaven.

The very thing Jesus was talking about in all those parables in today's Gospel. What all the short parables all have in common: the tiny seed that became a tree where birds made their home, yeast that turns dough into soft, melt in your mouth delicious bread, treasure that when found brings joy and inspires the person who found it to sell everything, like the merchant who sold everything to purchase a single pearl, and the net that gathers everyone and everything together, is they are all imaginative descriptions of God's Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. Perhaps Jesus told those parables so that those listening to him then and now might learn how to recognize God's Kingdom of Heaven when we encounter it in the world, so we might know what to do when we find it, and perhaps discover for ourselves what Paul wrote in our second reading today from his letter to the Christians in Rome that nothing, not even all the worst or best stuff in the world, can separate from the love of God in Christ.

Jesus even gave a clue how to recognize God's Kingdom of Heaven in the final short parable in today's Gospel about the scribes or those who tell about God's Kingdom of Heaven as being like someone whose treasure is made of both the old and the new. Often this is interpreted that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and through his resurrection brings new life into the world, the salvation the world longs for. That interpretation is certainly not wrong. And there may be more to it. There is something about the old and new together that has those Kingdom of Heaven seeds in it. Like an old song about home sung not by its scribes or writers alone, but by people from all over the world together.

This summer is not the first time the song *Take Me Home Country Roads* has created this kind of sensation. In a Forward Day by Day devotional from over 20 years ago, one of the contributing authors described it happening in the mid 1990's in a country near the Dead Sea during a multinational military peacekeeping exercise. On the last night of the exercise, there was a cookout and live band. Everyone was certainly cordial, as much as they could be because not everyone spoke the same language. When the band started singing *Take Me Home Country Roads* everything changed. Everyone stopped talking, eating, whatever they had been doing and started singing together. In perfect English. They locked arms and swayed to the music just like in the World Cup. An Israeli soldier said to an American, "They're playing your song." Then an Egyptian Muslim replied, "No friend, they are playing the song of all of us."

Like a seed that has grown into a large tree where the birds of world can make their home, that is God's Kingdom of Heaven on earth: something old that is made new by connecting people to each other and God, by connecting us all to what we long for: belonging. And when everyone can let go of what separates us, like those characters in the parables that sold everything they owned in order to participate in God's Kingdom of Heaven: superiority, the need to be right, politics, and let all the stuff of division melt away and sing along, we find belonging, and the joy that comes with it. And while that joy doesn't destroy all that is difficult, trying, and unjust in the world, it shows us God's love in Christ is here with us in the midst of it all.

Every now and again, we are reminded of this truth when we recognize those moments of God's Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. In a seed that grows into tree that becomes home to many birds, yeast that gives bread its texture, a treasure in a field, a beautiful pearl, a net, and the storytellers or songwriters who embed God's Kingdom of Heaven in what is old making it new and for everyone.

I wonder when and how the song *Take Me Home Country Roads* will surface again, or if that is all there is for this Country Roads Summer. But even if it is a while before we hear the song and sing along again, it has already revealed God's love in Christ is right here in our midst, and when we let ourselves be part of it, and grow closer to God and each other, it can feel like coming home. Which is why maybe there is another short parable for this Country Roads Summer:

> God's Kingdom of Heaven is like a song about home we all know how to sing, and when we sing it together, we feel and create the belonging we seek in each other.

No wonder there's joy even in the song's first two words:, "Almost heaven."