

Pictures of the Kingdom

This week's Gospel reading presents several of Jesus' short parables or, to use the old fashioned word, similitudes. If you cast your mind back to your grammar school days, you may remember that a statement in which one thing is said to be like another is called a simile; similitude is the archaic form. I thought briefly this week about having a little fun with the fact that there are five or so of these short "likeness" stories in the passage and going on a riff about the Four Tops and the Gramercy Five and the Four Freshmen and other such musical groups but I won't subject you to that flight of fancy this morning.

I do want to say a couple of things about the nature of parables, though. Parables, like similitudes or similes and metaphors, are a form of imaginative and comparative speech. They describe things that may be very unlike each other in essential ways, yet bear some resemblance to each other. Jesus used these short stories to describe for his followers that thing with which he was intimately acquainted that they were just beginning to learn about; that is, the in-breaking Kingdom of God. His stories are fanciful, yet deeply real. They use very concrete, every day examples to illustrate a huge and difficult concept – what the world would look like if God's will were actually followed by humankind.

Jesus could use these simple illustrations because every day things have multiple resonances in our minds. They trigger different memories and understandings for each of us. Culturally, we may agree on the significance of a particular object used as a symbol but individually we will each give it our own shade of meaning. This means that Jesus' parables, while presenting a general overall impression, will be interpreted in slightly different ways by different hearers. Their truth is not limited to one particular interpretation. It is not really possible to say of any parable, "It means *this* and only *this*."

With that said, I want to share with you my own thoughts on these parables; thoughts which have been deepened and expanded by the sermons I've heard and books and articles I've read. I can't honestly tell you which of these ideas I came to on my own and which I've appropriated, although the fact that I'm not a first-century Galilean farmer or merchant or fisherman probably means that I heard most of this from somebody else.

Before I get to the parables themselves, though, let's think for a minute about their overall topic: the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew's version of the Jesus story, Jesus' initial and core message is much like his cousin John's: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Time and the vagaries of language have robbed us of a sense of just how radical that call was. A more up to date translation might be: "Change your lives and join the revolution. We're overthrowing the government so God can be in charge." Sounds a little different, doesn't it? Matthew then goes on to relate how Jesus used sermons, miracles, and parables to demonstrate just what the reign of God would look like in contrast to the reign of Herod or his puppet-master, Caesar.

To our ears, this may sound overly political. Having lived for many generations in a representative democratic republic, we certainly don't respond in the same way to promises of a kingdom of heaven or Kingdom of God or any other style of monarchy. It is easier for us to hear the deep truth of what Jesus had to proclaim when we move away from a way of talking about God that we associate with Crusaders and religious abuse and toward portrayals of God that highlight God's love and care for God's creation. And although various substitutes have been

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proposed over the years for the phrase “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven,” to my mind none has been more appropriate and helpful than Josiah Royce’s words adopted by Martin Luther King, Jr., “the Beloved Community.”

So if we reinterpret Jesus’ call as “Change your lives, the Beloved Community is here” and understand the parables as his teaching about the Beloved Community, we can continue to take advantage of generations of previous teaching about the parables and add some new interpretations as well, a course of action that seems especially appropriate given the last similitude in this passage, to which I’ll return later. Let’s begin with the twinned parables of the mustard plant and the yeast.

These parables go to prove my earlier assertion that we can only learn some of the truths of the parables from study because we cannot fully understand the implications of the mustard plant and the yeast to the first century farmer or housewife. These folks, a prominent part of Jesus’ original audience, would have respectively viewed these two plants as pests. Jesus is not exaggerating much when he talks about the tininess of the mustard seed nor its radical propensity for growth. An ancient Jewish writing warns never to plant a mustard seed in your garden. It will take over completely, choking out the desired growth. If memory serves me, “The Cotton Patch Version of the Gospels” substitutes the dreaded kudzu vine for the mustard plant in this parable and if you’ve spent any time in the South, you’ll understand that. If Jesus were among us here in the Pacific Northwest, I suspect he’d talk about blackberry brambles. You don’t plant those things! To begin with, they seem to waft in on the air and then they just flat take over.

Likewise, wild yeast, in kitchens that did not know refrigeration or anti-bacterial scrubs for the counter, seemingly wafts in from nowhere, which could be a real problem for the observant Jewish housewife. Yeast was regarded as unclean during Passover and the days leading up to it and needed to be totally expunged from the household to prevent it from leavening the ceremonial bread. In many Biblical passages, yeast is a metaphor for sin and uncleanness. As those of you who bake know, just a little bit of yeast can leaven enough flour for many baked goods.

So why does Jesus liken the Beloved Community to two such undesirable plants? We should remember that by softening the terms “kingdom of heaven” or “kingdom of God” to “Beloved Community,” we do not reduce the subversive nature of God’s influence on our culture. The fact of the matter is that a world in which people love God and love their neighbor as themselves is not universally hoped for. Our culture is built on self-centeredness, greed, lust, envy, and most of the rest of the so-called “deadly sins.” The powers that be, both human and spiritual, want us to strive against each other because it lines their pockets and heightens their influence. The Beloved Community is subversive because it works against the *de facto* rulers of our world, knocks them off their thrones in favor of the Loving Creator and the ethos of love.

We may also consider the opportunistic nature of both mustard and yeast and look for that trait in the Beloved Community. Once God’s loving influence begins to be manifest in our lives, it spreads. Once we have heard the Good News of Jesus, our lives are changed and will keep on changing given half a chance. The Holy Spirit’s whispers in our ears grow louder and more insistent; we become more and more aware of the tug of God on our lives. David Lose writes,

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“God’s kingdom (is) like that – far more potent than we’d imagined and ready to spread to every corner of our lives. How might we regard routine invitations to read the Bible, pray, and come to Sunday worship if we thought these things might lead to our lives being infiltrated, changed, and taken over by God’s reality and rule?” It’s a good reminder to us that a simple action like inviting a friend to attend worship with us can really change their life... and ours.

That’s a good thought to carry into the next pairing of similitudes: the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl of great price. In each of these, the common teaching (and common because it is very true) is about the value of participating in the Beloved Community for each one of us. Once we have discovered the deep joy and satisfaction of living in the Jesus Way, we are willing to forsake the things the world tells us are valuable and turn instead to loving each other. There are many here among us this morning, I know, who could easily and happily tell us why they, in the words of the old song, would “rather have Jesus than silver or gold... rather be his than have riches untold... (would) rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.” That’s why we call it the Good News, right? Because it leads us to a life that is abundant and satisfying in a way nothing else can offer. Membership in the Beloved Community is the true treasure of our lives, our true pearl of great price.

I noticed for the first time this week (at least, as far as I can remember) that there are at least two very different ways to enter into the Beloved Community according to these parables. There are those who seek it out and those who simply stumble into it. We used to at least think of unchurched Americans as religious Seekers, like the merchant in search of fine pearls. We would throw open the doors of our churches and in they would come to be met with special programs designed especially for them, do you remember? Seeker-oriented programming, it was called in denominational training material. Those days, if they ever really existed in the way we thought they did, are over. But there are still those who are going about their ordinary business in life and who walk through a familiar field or take a different path to work and are suddenly struck by the gleam of something in the corner of their eye. They stop, they look closer, they do a little digging, and they realize they’ve found what they weren’t even looking for! That’s why it matters how we make our faith into reality beyond these walls, so that people can notice it without looking for it. That’s why we’ve got to be ready to tell them why we live the way we live and how they can learn about it, too, when they stop and dig around and ask, “What is this?” People may no longer be knocking on the doors of the churches to find authentic ways of living with integrity in the world but they are very likely to recognize the Beloved Community when they see it. They will know us by our love and all the other ways in which we let the fruit of the Spirit show in our lives: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I wish I could remember where I heard it, or maybe I read it but I really think it was in a sermon. Some years ago, a new idea was presented to me about the pearl of great price and it absolutely knocked my socks off. If you’ve got your Bibles open by any chance, look again at Matthew 13:45. Unlike the parable just before it, the one about the buried treasure, it doesn’t actually compare the kingdom to the pearl. It compares the kingdom, the Beloved Community, to the merchant. Now, that could be one of those bits of now fairly commonplace wisdom about the search or the journey being the more important thing than the finding or the arrival. But what I heard from that forgotten preacher was different and, for me at least, more impactful. What if

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God is the merchant? And what if the pearl that is being sought is us, you and me? It is the story out of the life of God and the salvation history of God's people that some call "the Christ event": that God was so intent on bringing us to Godself that God gave up everything on our behalf. Some years after Jesus died and was raised, an unknown Christian composed a hymn that was quoted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Do you know the one I mean? "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Can you feel the wonder of that, that we are the pearl, each of us, you and me? That God gave up everything for us, to rescue us, in a way I at least still do not fully understand, from the mire we'd immersed ourselves in to make us a part of the Beloved Community?

With that understanding, let us move to the Beloved Community as a net, thrown into the sea, which catches fish of every kind. I find a number of quick lessons here. First of all, it is the Beloved Community's job to bring in everybody, or as the first pastor of this church used to say, "Love everybody." Whatever dividing up is to happen happens much later and not by us. It's not our job to say who's in and who's out. All are welcome.

Many commentators feel that this parable is a follow-on of sorts to the parable of the mustard seed. The analysis is that the birds of the air that nest in the mustard plant grown huge represent the Gentiles, the nations that flock to Israel's God in the times of fulfillment, or in Jesus' terminology in the kingdom of God. There are passages in Ezekiel and in Daniel that point to such an interpretation. This part of the mustard parable alongside the illustration of the clean and unclean fish seems to indicate that Gentiles too can be a part of the Beloved Community, luckily for us. The presence of all kinds of fish in the net of the Beloved Community is also reminiscent of the clean and unclean animals on the sheet which comes down from heaven in Peter's dream in Acts, a dream he and the other leaders of the new Church interpret as opening the door to Gentiles. Ultimately, of course, all of these ideas stem from the very first story in Genesis, when God creates the world and all that is in it and proclaims everything, "Very good." For me, the messages of God's self-giving love, of the goodness of all creation, of the calling to all humankind all work together to provide a picture of the Beloved Community that is all-encompassing, all blessing, all love.

I hope that my remarks today have been an appropriate response to the final similitude in our passage today. Jesus said, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." It may be that he was referring to his own teaching, which blended previous understanding about God from the Scriptures and tradition with his own unique insights. It may be, as some scholars suggest, that these words were remembered by (or authored by) Matthew and used as a justification for his own practice in this Gospel of linking the new deeds and teachings of Jesus to passages in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Today, I have shared with you from the things that have become traditional teaching in our heritage, things that I've heard and read of

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more recent vintage, and things that occurred to me over the course of the last week. But along with these understandings, I think this final similitude challenges all of us. In our lives in the world, we will have the opportunity to tell people about Jesus both through our lives and in our words. As we do so, we must continue to draw on the wisdom of the past and apply it to our new circumstances. In addition to doing so as individuals, we must also be ready to blend old and new as a community. As Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we must continually re-evaluate which of our long-held practices are helpful, nurturing and life-giving and which hold us back, turn people off and keep them from a stronger relationship with God and neighbor. We must be fearless in trying new things and wise about choosing which to repeat. We must be ruthless about discarding what no longer works even as we celebrate that which continues to give rich meaning after long use.

But ultimately, the lesson from all of these little parables this morning is that once we have grasped the character of the kingdom of heaven, the Beloved Community, it is up to us to continue its spread. We are about to sing a new song from our hymnal called, “You Are the Seed.” As we sing, let us pay attention to the metaphors it contains. We, like the tiny mustard seed, can infect our garden with the subversive, opportunistic love of God. We, like the yeast, can leaven an entire community. We carry the message that we, each of us, is the pearl of great price to our Loving Creator and that we together, the Beloved Community, are the treasure which the world seeks. As we sing, let us prepare our hearts to go out into the sea of life and to act as the net which brings all manner of people into the loving arms of God. We are the seed. We are the yeast. We are the pearl. We are the fishers of men. Thanks be to God.