Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Rom. 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-52

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 26, 2020

For three Sundays in a row our Gospel texts have presented us with parables of Jesus; parables, as was mentioned last week, being short stories with **inviting** beginnings and **shocking** endings that leave their readers wondering just what hit them… In this morning's Gospel text we have five such parables, four of which I will speak of this morning, all of them starting with the lead-in line, "The kingdom of heaven is like…."

Once when I was trying to help the folks at Redeemer Lutheran Church experience the full shock value of what Jesus was inviting his listeners to hear and see in these parables about the kingdom of heaven, I let everyone in the congregation get all settled into their familiar pews one Sunday morning….I let them get all comfy in the places they called their own, let them relax into the order of worship they knew like the back of their hand…. And then at the beginning my sermon I said, "OK everyone, the kingdom of heaven is like this….please get up, take your purses, your bulletins, your sweaters and jackets, your babies and diaper bags, and move to another pew, preferably far from the one where you are used to sitting…."

(If you know that expression, "he looked daggers at me", you will know how the good Lutherans of Redeemer responded to my request, and you will understand perhaps, why, years later, people at Redeemer still complained about "that Sunday when I made them move to a different place in the sanctuary").

But really, this is exactly what Jesus was up to in the collection of parables we just heard read… "The kingdom of heaven is like this," he said, using a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure hunter and a merchant to paint a picture of what the kingdom of heaven is like…

As I said last Sunday, it's difficult for us to appreciate just how disruptive and unsettling Jesus' parables would have been to his disciples when first they heard them. And these "kingdom of heaven" parables are no exception. Matter of fact I don't think I understood the full extent of their impact until I recently read a commentary on them that was different from all the rest I'd ever read…

The thing is, most commentaries suggest that these small stories were intended to be "**parables of surprise"** as Jesus used the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price (each of them ordinary, everyday items), and then upped the ante on them past all reasonable expectations… surprising his listeners in the process…

… A tiny mustard seed becoming as big as the tree of life… yeast to make enough bread to feed an entire wedding banquet… treasures and pearls whose values so far exceed the value of anything else, everything else is cast aside for the sake of acquiring them….

These parables, say most commentaries, are little stories of unimaginable growth and surprise, intended to do to their listeners exactly what the kingdom of heaven is intended to do… That is, to challenge any notion that the ways of God are in keeping with the "same old, same old ways of the world" and to open listeners to the possibility of seeing God's kingdom burgeoning forth in places and times and ways they never expected.

Which is not a "bad" interpretation of the parables' intention… But what I realized when I read this one particular commentary was that this "popular" interpretation doesn't go far enough… Not when you realize that every ordinary thing Jesus used to make his point in these little stories was something that would have sounded not only surprising, **but downright shady, unsavory, corrupt, invasive, and subversive to first century ears, Jewish ears in particular…**

Really….

To equate the kingdom of heaven with the mustard seed, when the mustard plant was considered in the agrarian culture of Jesus' day to be the most obnoxious, invasive, damaging trash-weed imaginable…

To equate the kingdom of heaven with yeast, when yeast was thought to be an agent of corruption, an active ingredient in the decomposition of bodies…

To equate the kingdom of heaven with a sneaky, conniving guy who finds a treasure in someone else's field, and then hides the treasure and buys that field without telling the present owner about the treasure…

To equate the kingdom of heaven with a merchant who sells everything he has in order to buy a pearl, when merchants were held in about as much esteem in those days as used car salesmen are in our own…

Really, what in heaven's name is going on here? Why on earth would Jesus use such unsavory, un-kosher, un-clean, shady, morally-questionable similes to speak of the kingdom of heaven?

I've thought about this question a great deal this past week, and in contemplating three **contemporary** "kingdom of heaven" parables, resonant with **our own time and place,** I have come to better understand the gift the unsettling and shocking similes in these parables offer….

One such parable coming from a Christmas poem by contemporary poet Jane Yolen, who imagines a very unexpected visitor to the manger on the night of Jesus' birth… The "parabolic form" of her poem sounding like this… "The kingdom of heaven is like all of the

Christmas characters in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels gathered around the Holy Family; stable animals, shepherds, wise men, angels… and nestled in the hay, next to the Christ child, with the child's hand resting upon his head in love, lies the serpent from the Garden of Eden…"

The last three lines of Jane Yolen's poem, spoken from the perspective of the serpent, reading this way… *This boy child, with careful, loving art, reached down from his crib, wiped the hate from my heart."* (Despite what Christian tradition has taught us about the serpent's place in the story, the kingdom of heaven is like this…).

Another such parable coming from a story told by tattoo-filled, ex-drug-addict Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Webber in a sermon she preached on the kingdom of heaven… It's a story I've shared with you before… a story that has become a touchstone for me whenever I need to be reminded of what the kingdom of heaven is "like"… A story whose "parabolic form" sounds like this…

"The kingdom of heaven is like a group of young people who, after their friend PJ died of a drug overdose, stole into his apartment to clear out all of PJ's 'Playboys' and pornographic videotapes because they wanted to spare PJ's sweet parents from Iowa the pain of seeing those things when they came to collect their son's belongings."

As Nadia Bolz Webber said of that gesture of caring extended by PJ's friends, "That is the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven on earth… That we might clear out the pornography from our dead friends' homes before their nice, small-town parents come to settle their son's affairs. It's small, it's surprising, and it's a little profane. But it's the real thing."

(I can tell you right now, the pastors of my day would never have used such a parable to speak of the kingdom of heaven).

And the third contemporary "kingdom of heaven" parable coming from something that took place during a talent show in the Sedgwick Elementary School Gymnasium one winter morning years ago when I was still teaching there… A parable that goes like this…

"The kingdom of heaven is like two ragamuffin little kids, 6 years old, skinny as all get-out, and dressed in mismatched hand-me-downs, standing in front of the whole of the Sedgwick School body… Those two hardscrabble little kids taking hands, and singing together, a-cappella, "What if God is one of us, just a slob like one of us… What if God is one of us, just trying to find his way home?"

"The kingdom of heaven is like this," I want to say… Because after a life-time of perfect attendance at church and Sunday School…. After beginning seminary classes and reading endless theological tomes about the history and meaning of Christianity, **never** had this "theologically astute, well-educated, articulate, soon-to-be-Lutheran-pastor"… never had she so

deeply understood the scandalously downward, ridiculously outward, and carnally incarnate presence of Emmanuel, God with us…

The kingdom of heaven is like this….

All of these contemporary parables offering similes not unlike Jesus' parables in their un-kosher, uncouth, shady, morally-questionable, invasive, and unsettling ways… Begging the question of "why?" Why Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven had to be so… jarring… so… subversive to our sense of normalcy and decency and plain old sensibility…

A question whose answer can only be found in the realization of what Jesus was up against when he tried to awaken people to the **possibility** of the kingdom of heaven in their midst… a possibility which Jesus incarnated with every sinew in his body and every impulse in his heart as he ate with sinners, touched lepers, healed on the Sabbath, challenged injustice, forgave sins and hung out with the guys outside the Greyhound Bus Station…

Because what Jesus was up against was the ways of the world. What Jesus was up against was the Roman Empire. What Jesus was up against was the religious establishment…

What Jesus was up against were the likes of Elaine Hewes who will do almost anything possible to create a god who will stay in his "holy place" giving out gold conduct stars for good behavior instead of a God who invites us into messy and unpredictable situations where the clearest glimpse of God's "holy presence" is often found in places no "self-respecting" God would dare to go…

What Jesus was up against were all the powerful forces that took the destructive and demeaning things of this world and made them palatable, conventional, orderly and "sensible"… "necessary" for smooth governance, economic growth, border protection, and salvation… What Jesus was up against were all the cultivated fields of certainty…. The unjust policies and practices polished to a perfect sheen so as to appear good and right and true….

No wonder he needed to use similes invasive enough to make a mockery of all the nice neat boundaried rows… No wonder he needed to use similes corrupt enough to corrupt the corruption, like yeast in a decomposing body…

Mustard seeds, yeast, unsavory characters… Jesus used them all to put Rome on notice, to put the religious establishment on notice, to put every constrictive restrictive narrow-minded-small-hearted thing on notice declaring, "The kingdom of heaven has come near, and it is fundamentally ***different*** from all of this…."

Which makes the kingdom of heaven incredibly difficult to preach about. Because who wants to be unsettled, invaded, subverted and "corrupted" by such a thing? Who wants to be a disciple of someone whose entire reason for being was to be the mustard seed in a world that prefers the straight cultivated rows of certainty and control?

Only those perhaps, who are shaped and formed by a certain story…

A story that opens our eyes to see the beautiful excruciating gift of the moment, as there comes into the most unexpected of times and places the expansive reach of Love's presence welcoming even those whom tradition has excluded from God's grace, including the serpent in the garden….

A story that opens our eyes to see the beautiful excruciating gift of the moment, when, in the midst of inclinations to limit God to things "clean and respectable", there comes a few young people who, for love of their friend and care for his sweet parents from Iowa, steal into his apartment to gather up all of his pornography and take it away…

A story that opens our eyes to see the excruciating beauty of the moment when, in the midst of inclinations to limit God to "holy" places, there comes into a school gymnasium in Sedgwick, Maine two hardscrabble little kids who sing a song asking if God isn't just a slob like the rest of us, trying to find his way home…

All of these shocking, scandalous glimpses of God being the pearl of great price… the kingdom of heaven… the immensity of God's unknowable presence known in the oddest, fleshiest, most ordinary and derelict of places…

Who could have imagined such a thing?

Only those perhaps who are shaped and formed by a certain story… A story about a God who is love… a God who is love, and whose purpose and passion it is to be known in the world God so loves… A God whose will it is to be known in the oddest, fleshiest, most ordinary and derelict of places, **because that is where we live…** Because that is where we come to know that nothing can separate us from that love… not life or death or angels or rulers or things present or things to come or powers or height or depth or anything in all of creation…

Because that love is here and now, and out there and everywhere, coming up where it is least expected and often times not wanted, **because of course it's the pain-in-the-ass kind of love the world can't stand…**

But it comes anyway, everywhere hearts are opened, and arms are extended, and bread is broken, and mercy is granted, and love is shared, and justice is demanded, and walls are dismantled, and hope is renewed…

Despite the fact that the world can't stand it, it comes anyway… again and again and again, saying, "the kingdom of heaven is like this….

It is like this *(motion toward the gathered congregation)…*

It is like this *(make the sign of the cross)…"*

Who could ever imagine such a thing except those who have been invaded and persuaded, subverted and converted, interrupted and corrupted, healed and sealed… by Love's devastatingly beautiful story?