08302026 The Trouble With Living in a Parable

The trouble with living in a parable is that you don't know how it ends. For most of this past year, I have wondered if Gethsemane Lutheran Church has been living in a parable.

We have had a man live in a tent in an outdoor stairwell on our property. We've gotten to know many unhoused neighbors and people passing through the neighborhood in need of various kinds of help. Some of those people needed emergency medical attention and were cared for by church members who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Members of this church built relationships with unhoused folks, and we've come to learn about the real challenges a person faces when they don't have a permanent address, and why homeless shelters are not a safe option for some people. We've witnessed the cumulative effect of days, weeks, and months of living an unstable daily life while sleeping outdoors, what sleep deprivation does a human brain.

Some of these unhoused friends have gotten caught up in the justice system, which has been a whole other frontier of learning. All this time, faithful church volunteers have continued stocking the Little Free Food Pantry. We hosted a community meal back in July for anyone to show up, and we've gotten to know more neighbors that way.

Perhaps you've been on the Social Action committee and have been involved with any of these ministries. Perhaps you've served on the church council and have been part of the decision-making about resources. Perhaps you've observed from a distance and just wondered what's going on, or maybe all of this is brand-new information to you today.

I only bring this up now, which just happens to be on the day we've scheduled as "God's Work, Our Hands" Sunday, because it is clear to me that God is doing something important with this congregation, and it's time to talk about it. This is not about tooting our own horn for all the good stuff we've done; this is about serving others because God has granted us resources and wisdom, and to God belongs the glory. Amen? Amen.

At every turn, I have seen faithful people responding to the needs they witness, and members of this congregation have brought an abundance of compassion, a wealth of knowledge, and an even larger measure of faith because no individual among us is entirely confident that we know exactly what we're doing. We haven't done this stuff before. We kinda *don't* know what we're doing.

But God doesn't call only those servants who already know what they're doing; sometimes God presents the next right step at just the right time. And I have seen it over and over again: meeting a person with needs we don't know how to address, just in time, the Holy Spirit opens an avenue to explore and presents a way forward.

Which is why it feels like we are living in a parable. I'm just not sure yet what parable it is, or if it's still in the process of being written.

Another trouble with living in a parable is that you're also not sure who's supposed to be the hero and who's supposed to be the villain. Jesus told lots of parables, and frequently, the heroes and villains aren't who you would expect. Sometimes the absentee vineyard owner represents God; sometimes the wealthy boss is the villain; sometimes the dishonest steward is

the people's hero. In one parable, Jesus suggested he himself is the thief in the night breaking into the house to bind up the evil forces imprisoning humanity and setting us free.

The thing about heroes and villains is that it isn't always simple to assign these roles to humans. God created us in all our complexity, with our gifts and talents and creativity. And when Jesus tells parables, he's teaching us to look at the world differently. We'd rather have easy categories: good versus bad, legal versus illegal, well-resourced versus needy, giver versus taker.

But every one of us has choices to make every day, and every one of us is a saint and sinner at the same time. When Jesus teaches, he challenges us to interpret the law not in fear of God's power to punish or destroy, but to interpret the law in light of God's immense grace. The hero of a parable is usually the one demonstrating mercy, however unlikely or unreasonable their action might be.

Listen, I know we didn't sign up for this. All we did was show up in this congregation and worship God, as people have done for over 130 years, loving God and our neighbors in the best ways we know how. We could leave it at that. We might be living in The Parable of the Congregation That Did Their Best.

But unlike all of us individuals, this building is here 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and this building sees a lot. Many of us have now had our eyes opened by the stories of unhoused neighbors and the challenges they face, the stories of nearby homeowners who tell us about what they witness overnight, the stories in the news of growing homelessness and how that is affecting public parks and business parking lots. Too many of us have restocked the Little Free Food Pantry over and over again inside a single hour because the food disappears as fast as it is placed outside. It wasn't like this even one year ago.

That's the reality, which is painful. And it's easy to want to avoid pain by denying it or by saying "I'm not responsible for this" or by saying, as Peter did, "God forbid it, Lord!" So Jesus corrected Peter: "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Setting your mind on human things is to stick close to what's comfortable, to avoid risks, to stay in your own self-defined lane, and to avoid pain at all costs. Setting your mind on divine things is to lean into compassion, to give abundantly because you know so intimately the God who is the source of everything, and not even needing answers but trusting in God's mercy to guide you.

Then in the Gospel lesson, Jesus gets really wild and tells his disciples: "take up your cross and follow me!" Of all the possible things to pick up, why in the *world* would Jesus advise anyone to pick up their cross?! Pick up your cross means to DEAL with uncomfortable reality. In the face of pain and even certain death, be bold enough to pick up a cross and carry it around! It's a message! The message is: death, I am not afraid of you!

How does a congregation pick up a cross and deal with the reality of where God has planted us? We could do nothing, but that would amount to saving our life only to lose it. What will it profit us to retain our personal comfort and abandon our mission? Can we gain the admiration of the neighbors and still lose our soul? How do we lose our lives for Christ's sake, knowing that only in dying to ourselves will we ever find the abundant life we are truly seeking?

For one thing, we need to die to the fear that because we don't already know the path, we shouldn't move forward. The truth is we have learned some things, and it's time to share the things we have learned. For example, we've learned we can't have a person living in a tent in the stairwell; we've also learned that our building, as it exists right now, is not a fitting habitation for any individual for any substantial length of time. We've learned about resources and safety nets and community partners, and I'm hopeful that in these next several weeks, we'll be able to hear from members of the Social Action committee who have learned the most.

And in a fun twist this year, this congregation won't be splitting up into an earlier worship service and later worship service—this year, we're moving into the fall season with one Sunday worship service. You know what that means? Everyone can stay after worship for the social action committee meeting! Okay, maybe not everybody, but we'll explore the possibilities of how to connect with each other in support of each other and our neighbors.

There will be room for open communication, and within a few weeks, the council has already planned a listening campaign that—I suspect—will especially be of help to people who prefer one-on-one conversation rather than conversation in big groups. We will listen carefully to one another's concerns. No individual among us has all the answers—we cannot afford to silence anybody. We have to listen to one another. There will not be a battle between us and them. We are one congregation, humbly seeking God's will! This is holy discernment.

I confess I don't know the answers, either. But too many times I have seen how God has provided just what is needed, so all I have is faith that God is working; I don't know need to know all the ins and outs of every step of the future. Which is a little scary to say; it's vulnerable. It's my nature to withdraw when I feel out of my depth, which has happened a lot over the past year: I don't know what to do or what to say, so I fall into silence. But I also have seen too much and I've been encouraged by too many of you; I've been moved by your compassion and energized by your relentless creativity. It's a lot easier now to imagine picking up a cross and saying, Death, I'm just not afraid of you anymore. I've seen too much life, and God's abundant life is just too powerful for me to stay afraid.

And any good thing that the Holy Spirit is up to, you can count on Satan looking for ways to sneak in and tear things down. This is why prayer and Scripture contemplation are so important, to be immersed in God's Word. This is why St. Paul wrote letters of encouragement to faith communities in the ancient world, trying to follow God in their own specific context. And what he wrote to the church in Rome is good advice for any followers of Jesus: "let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor."[1]

There's trouble with living in a parable, yes. But there's also incredible grace. The grace of living in a parable is that Jesus is the one speaking it into existence. You don't get to cast yourself—nor anyone else—as the hero nor as the villain. You make your faithful steps and let God write the story, which is so much bigger than any one of us could imagine. We might be living in the Parable of the Little Church That Could.

Look around, friends! The kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.

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[1] Romans 12:9-10