

A New Parable

And here we are on our third week of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Matthew.

Up to today we have heard the parables of:

the Sower and then Jesus explained it,
the Weeds among the Wheat and then Jesus explained IT --

Today we hear the parables of:

the Mustard Seed --

the parable of the yeast --

buried treasure lost and found --

a precious and expensive pearl sought then purchased --

a net filled with every fish imaginable, which is sorted and separated --

There are many parallels within each of these parables:

distinction of good versus evil

separation of what is wanted and what is feared

that only a little bit of faith is needed to inherit the kingdom of heaven.

The Sower is about planting seed in the most fertile soil...and we are meant to be the fertile soil.

And yet, how many of us doubt?

How many of us have stepped away from our faith, even if only for a little while?

How many of us have found it difficult to deal with challenges from someone who doesn't understand faith the same way we do?

Hmmm.

Okay, let's move to the parable about the Weeds among the Wheat.

We are meant to be the wheat which is sowed and celebrated as opposed to the weeds that are collected and burned.

How many of us are absolutely flawless in our theology, in that we never, ever doubt?

How many of us have changed in our theological beliefs as we experience life?

Hmmm.

And then today there is the parable of the Mustard Seed – one of the tiniest seeds can grow to be a large tree where the birds of the air can nest and live. It doesn't take a lot of attention to grow and grows easily and quickly. However, if it's not harvested as soon as it's ready it can take over and behave more like a weed than a strong, majestic tree.

How many of us have had a "come to Jesus" moment, a time in our lives when we rock back on our heels, understanding that we are answering a call to serve Jesus...either in a formal way as clergy or licensed lay minister, or a more informal way, of living our life and patterning our life after the teachings of Jesus? In some places, accepting Jesus is done in the midst of a congregation, yet in others, it's done privately and quietly.

And we all know that to follow Jesus is one of the most rewarding and yet difficult things we will ever do in this life.

The next parable is that of a women working yeast or leaven into flour to bake something delicious. Generally, you can't eat flour alone. Or you can, but it doesn't take that great. If you add leaven to the flour, and a bit of water with some patience you can have fluffy bread. In order to bake with yeast, you need to follow certain steps. And have patience.

You dissolve the yeast with sugar, salt and water and wait for it to dissolve. Then you add flour and mix. Then you kneed. Add oil, put it in a bowl, cover it with a damp towel and let it rest for a couple of hours. And you wait. Then you get to punch it, kneed it some more, shape it, and let it rest. Then you bake it. Sounds simple enough, right? But with so many steps something can go wrong at many points along the way...too much flour at once and the dough becomes tough. Not letting it rise long enough or letting it rise too long and there will be no air bubbles or too many air bubbles. Bread baking takes skill and patience. And practice.

How many of you have baked bread from scratch? With or without a bread machine? I haven't baked bread, but I've eaten a lot of it.

How many of us are comfortable to say we have all the answers to our faith? In the middle of the night, does any one else have moments of doubt? Of frustration?

The parable of the buried treasure...here's a modern take.

The kingdom of heaven is like a person trying to find a parking spot outside the building where their appointment is and after circling the block, they find a parking spot right outside, but are 10 minutes late and miss their appointment...

The parable of the pearl...another modern take.

The kingdom of heaven is like a person buying their dream house, and looking forward to excitedly furnishing it. They go to a store and find the very best sectional at an incredible sale price, and have it shipped to the new house, only to discover it doesn't fit and is final sale.

The parable of the fish...a modern take.

The kingdom of heaven is like receiving the biggest bag of jelly beans you can imagine. You spend hours sorting the good jelly beans from the bad jelly beans; the ones you like from the ones you don't like. Just after you've throw away the ones you don't like your best friend comes over and you ask if they want some. And the ones they like best are the ones you've just thrown away.

You see, Jesus is speaking to his followers in parables to help make his teachings a little more understandable. Which, between you and me, often are not simple and certainly not easy to understand.

Because you see, in the case of the parable of the sower, none of us are only the fertile soil. Many of us have struggled with being led astray, of questioning our faith or of even abandoning our faith when it got too difficult to live it.

Hopefully we come back and try again. And in trying again we learn from our mistakes. And hopefully we don't repeat those mistakes. Because unlike us, God is infinitely patient. And will give us an infinite number of chances to get it right.

So, what if, in the parable of the Sower, Jesus is trying to teach us that we are at our best when we are like the fertile soil, yet understands that sometimes we have to blow off the path, be burned in our assumptions, be planted in shallow soil or get lost in the weeds before our soil is fertile enough to give us strong, solid roots and the ability to grow and share?

What if, in the parable of the weeds among the wheat, Jesus is reaching out to us when we are the weeds in order to give us an opportunity do better?

Maya Angelou says "You did the best you knew how to do. And when you knew better, you did better."

We don't always have the answers, sometimes we make mistakes. Actually, let's be more accurate. We don't always have the answers, and we ALL make mistakes.

It's okay to change the way we do things, when we learn there is a better way. It's not okay to continue to do something we know to be wrong, simply because we've "always done it this way". Like inherent racism. Or condoning inappropriate behaviour because "that's just the way they are".

All of these parables are about finding, losing, being, and wanting. They are about the Kingdom of heaven. And they should be read fully and carefully. At first glance they seem very straight-forward, yet the minute you dive more fully into them, they get difficult, complicated and sometimes even messy.

Planting mustard seed to grow a crop. Easy, peasy, and yet, if it's not properly tended it can grow like a weed, which will choke out other plants. If it's planted and ignored the results will be much different than what is intended.

Baking bread, there is nothing more wholesome! And yet, it can be an unmitigated disaster. If the yeast isn't properly dissolved the bread will be grainy, and not in a good way. If the dough isn't worked properly it won't rise and if it's worked too much it will rise but be very tough. Honestly, it seems like an awful lot of work.

Hmmmm, kinda like our faith journey, eh?

All of these parables bring us to the Kingdom of God. At first glance they seem simple and straight-forward. But upon closer examination they are revealed as multi-layered and complex. Which is exactly what our faith should be.

One of things I love most about our Churches is that we encourage questioning. You will never be asked to check your brain at the door and "simply accept". There are things we don't yet know, but part of the joy of a faith journey is, in fact, the journey.

There have been; there are; and there will continue to be, times when my faith feels solid. Yet more often than not I find myself shaking my head, trying to figure out the finer details of my faith, feeling as though I'm standing in quicksand, rather than on rock.

The Kingdom of God is like a wounded bird. The other birds left her behind because they couldn't wait to continue their journey. She was found and rescued by someone very kind who wanted to help her recover, and then keep her safe. Yet she knew the time would come that she would need to go her own way. And so, one night, when she was strong enough, she rested on the open windowsill and gave thanks to the one who had saved and healed her. Then she flew off to where her people would be waiting, singing the song of thanksgiving to the one who Created her, the one who Healed her and the ones who were Waiting for her.

Our faith journeys are as unique as our fingerprints and as we grow and change so do they. With my own journey, I am finding things that a decade ago were terribly important to me, are now, not that important. My belief used to be so very broad, and yet now, it's quite narrow. The basis of my faith, which I base on the life and ministry of Jesus, is that we are called to love.

We love the worthy and especially the unworthy. Those who are addicted. Who are abused. Who have been broken. Those who hate us. Those who love us. Who are struggling. Who are healed.

We are called to love without condition. And certainly we are called to love, without stopping to figure out who is worthy. Remember who Jesus spent a lot of time with? Those on the fringes of polite society. He didn't dine with only the rich and powerful. Jesus also broke bread with tax collectors, sex-workers and sinners.

Because, at the end of the day, determining the value and worth of others is not our job. That belongs to Jesus.

Thanks be to God!

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Eighth After Pentecost
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Genesis 29.15-28
Romans 8.26-39
Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52