

REIGN OF LOVE
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July 27, 2014
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Jesus put before them another parable

(this is in fact, this at least the fourth in a whole parable library that Matthew offers here in his gospel)

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

(And then he told him them another and another, but seriously—mustard seeds and leaven are more than enough for now.)

Deep summer is upon us; the signs are everywhere. Not just the heat and the internet-killing storms, but also the cineplexes stuffed with big, loud, violent blockbuster films. The theaters of Shepherd are brimming with provocative drama. And our Sunday lectionary offers up parable after parable after parable. Don't we humans just love a good story? And, as one rabbinic saying goes: God so loves a story that God created humankind.

Stories entertain, but they also shape us, often quietly and without our permission. If you listen to Hollywood (or even the evening news) you will know that the world is a dangerous place, full of zombies, aliens and terrorists, all trying to take away *our* way of life. Most people are weak and inept, so what we really need is that big powerful guy with the big, bad weapon to come and wipe out all the bad people and things. Then, we shall be saved.

If we listen to the stories of Jesus, the parables that were told by him *and about him*, and if we can receive them on their own terms without projecting too much 21st century baggage onto them, if we can open our hearts just a crack, we just may see something new about the world, ourselves and our place in it. This is the point of a parable—not so much information as transformation.

Jesus would have told these perplexing stories often, riffing, playing, elaborating, but always using these common images and symbols in surprising, sometimes outrageous ways. He meant to wake people up, even shock them into seeing whole new possibilities.

The kingdom of God (or for Matthew "kingdom of heaven") was a very common first Jewish symbol. It referred to the dream that on some future day, the God of power and justice, would intervene in a broken world, overcome injustice, and raise up the Hebrew nation like a great tree. Then, we shall be saved. John Dominic Crossan, author of the fascinating book *The Power of the Parable: How Fiction By Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus*,

claims that the kingdom is just a simple shorthand for the expected divine cleanup of the big fat ugly mess we find here on earth. In Jesus' time, the hopes for this coming kingdom got fired up big time, along with the expectation of the big powerful guy with the big bad weapon who would come and usher it in. **The Messiah.** *Is it you?* Jesus was repeatedly asked. *Come and see*, he repeatedly replied. And what they saw was a dude on a donkey armed with a palm branch, and the invitation to *love one another as God has loved you.* (**Then, you shall be saved!**)

And THAT, according to Jesus, is the kingdom of God. Because the kingdom is not coming on some future day, it is already here, waiting to be fully realized through our willing collaboration with the Holy. Or as Crossan puts it, the message of Jesus can be summarized like this: the divine cleanup is already here but you people are waiting for God, while God is waiting for you. The kingdom of God, Reign of Love, can only come in and through us.

Its like this says Jesus: "a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field, the smallest of all the seeds, it grows into a mighty tree." To which his audience would either fall down laughing or walk away in disgust, depending on crowd. Everyone would have known that the tiny mustard grew only into a crappy little bush, but one that was also a terrible, invasive weed that could destroy an entire crop--think kudzu. Or multiflora roses. And exactly no sane person would ever take it and sow it in their field.

"The kingdom of heaven is also like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Entirely scandalous! When Jesus says yeast, his audience would not picture a tidy little packet of dried Fleischman's. They would picture the stinky, decaying, rotten mixture that could be used for baking bread. Which, for the first century Jew, would have unholy and forbidden. And here, it gets mixed in with 50 pounds of flour—a giant mound of unholiness (which would, we must also acknowledge, feed an awful lot of hungry people).

The kingdom of God is absolutely ordinary—seeds and dough; kind of corrupt—weeds and leaven; and somehow also life-giving in the most unexpected ways—nests and bread. A lot like human being and life. This paradox is embodied in the teaching and in the life of Therese of Lisieux, or so claims Thomas Keating in his lovely book about Therese and the kingdom parables entitled *A Transformation in Christ*. Keating writes: "the kingdom of God is (most) present in daily life when events that we consider disasters occur. God is never absent—it is just our belief system that makes us think that God could not be present when things, according to our judgment, go wrong... God is never more present than when things are going wrong—physical, mental, moral—just how... is the real challenge of everyday life."

This challenge—trusting the inbreaking Reign of Love, even in the small, painful, broken bits—animated Therese's entire life and inspired her so-called "little way", the spiritual path and practice of *living love in every moment and every circumstance of life*. Her life, by any measure, was tiny and tragic. Her mother died when she was three and her childhood was full of sickness, instability and extreme self absorption. But right alongside of it all, she also had this powerful, core conviction, very early on, that God loved her without measure, and desired to love the world through her. "Confidence (in God) and love" was her mantra. Raised in an ultra conservative Catholic family (whose

theology would have made Calvin look like an optimist) she entered a cloistered Carmelite convent at the scandalous age of 15. There she suffered terribly from untreated TB and died at the ripe old age of 24. But in this tiny life were seeds of immense love and desire, “greater than the universe” she would write. As her disease progressed, she was devastated to realize that she would never be (her career goals): an apostle preaching the gospel on all five continents at once; a missionary from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages; able to accomplish all the actions of all the saints all at one time. Tiny life, infinite desire.

In the last 18 months of her life, Therese was plunged into a devastating *experience of God's absence*, that lasted until her death; yet it was during this dark night that she articulated her most profound (and joyful) spiritual teaching. In light and in darkness, Therese followed her little way: live love in all things. Several months before she died, Therese said this “I feel that I’m about to enter my rest. But I feel especially that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love Him, of giving my little way to (others). If God answers my desires, my heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world.” When Therese died she was known to just a handful of people on the planet, yet, within just a couple of years, her writings had exploded across the globe. Today, she is one of the most influential spiritual figures in Christian history, companion to millions of people inspired and instructed by her little way of confidence and love, her core conviction: everything, *everything* is grace.

“The kingdom of God,” writes Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, “is available to you in the here and the now. But the question is whether you are available to the kingdom. Our practice is to make ourselves ready for the kingdom so that it can manifest in the here and the now. You don't need to die in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, you have to be truly alive...”

And truly alive means, at the very least, open -- to surprise, to new possibilities, new stories, to the ridiculous idea that the Holy just might be present in heartbreak even more than in joy. So what is it that breaks your heart these days... Innocent victims of war, child refugees, hungry neighbors, the cries of a wounded planet? Listen in those broken places for Love's invitation to you. What are the rotten stinky bits in your life these days—disease, disappointment, dysfunction—what might be growing, right there in the darkness we are working so hard to avoid? What if we stopped trying to find answers, and worked at making space for a tiny seed of something new to grow, listening, cultivating a simple trust, that in all things, love will guide us on our way. May this be so. Amen.

Song: Love Will Guide Us