

**CAN'T KILL A WEED: WHO IS PRECIOUS IN THE LORD'S SIGHT?**

**Scripture Readings:** Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

**Texts:** Romans 8:38-39; Matthew 13:51

I think we get so used to parables and current traditional understandings of them that sometimes we miss the real depth of a parable. Various interpretations of parables can be useful, yet we need to remember that Jesus told parables to give the people around him new insights in the working God's kin-dom in their lives. Parables change perspectives and sometimes shock our sensibilities.

The five parables we heard this morning come from the third discourse contained in the gospel of Matthew. The gospel writer wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses (and the new Israel) so he includes five discourses in the gospel to correspond to the five books of the Torah. In keeping with this idea of Jesus as the new Moses, it should not surprise us, then, that Jesus' first discourse is known as the Sermon on the Mount and it is introduced, not with Ten Commandments, but with blessings or beatitudes. This third discourse contains seven parables: the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the merchant, and the net. These parables focus on the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we talk about parables, it is probably helpful to review what we mean by a parable. I think the greatest temptation is turn a parable into an allegory; this transition is not to say that we can't learn something from an allegorical interpretation but we need to realize it also changes the character of the parable and may create more problems than it alleviates such as our image of God. The temptations to allegorize is so great that even the gospel writer does it with an interpretation of the sower, the wheat and the weeds, and to some extent, the net. We should also recognize that parables are not fables, object lessons, or necessarily a call to action.

Rather a parable is a metaphor to help us see the Kingdom of Heaven around us. When we hear the parable, we will understand that the actor in the parable is the Kingdom of Heaven, not us. If we understand a parable in this way, then the last five parables of this third discourse can challenge our assumptions about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The parable of mustard seed is traditionally understood as a description of how the Kingdom of Heaven grows. This understanding certainly fits history; the church grew

from a tiny band of believers in Israel to the state religion of the Roman Empire in three centuries. But, I wonder, if in the original telling that is what Jesus intended.

The gospel writer, I think, puts the parable of the mustard seed deliberately after the parable of the wheat and the weeds. The parable of the wheat and the weeds challenges our rush to judge good and evil, and the parable of the mustard seed compounds that challenge. In this parable, the mustard plant becomes a weed when it is planted in a field; the Torah is very clear about not mixing crops—the law of similarity influences a lot of the understanding of the world—one is not supposed to mix crops, clothes, dishes, and many other things. So when someone plants a mustard seed in a field, the planter is breaking the law. Even though the act is unlawful, the mustard seed grows beyond expectation (usually the sign of a blessing, not something unlawful.) The gospel writer even conflates two traditions by saying the mustard plant is the greatest of all shrubs and becomes a tree—conflating traditions is something the gospel writer of Matthew is really good at.

By comparing the mustard plant to a tree, the comparison becomes a contrast to the usual symbol of greatness, the cedars of Lebanon. So when Jesus creates this image of unlawful action with the usual image of mightiness and strength, what is he really saying about the Kingdom of God? Is he saying that we might discover the Kingdom of Heaven even in the unlawful, weedy patches of life?

The parable of the yeast points along these same lines while creating a tension: who really is the actor in this story, the yeast or the woman who hides the yeast?

Yeast was considered ritually unclean; for instance, when it is time for the Passover, a family must clean their house of all traces of yeast. Even a little bit of yeast would be considered a contaminant to the purity of the meal. Furthermore, in this parable, even the woman is suspect; in many instances, a woman is considered unclean. The fact that the woman hides the yeast in 50 pounds of flour reinforces the negative connotations in this story. The amount of flour touches on earlier Biblical stories: Abraham entertaining angels, Hannah's offering for her son, Samuel, and Gideon bringing his offering to the angel. So, now, the parable even pollutes previous stories!

Is Jesus saying that we can find the Kingdom of Heaven even in the contaminated parts of our lives and the world?

After telling the parable of the yeast, Jesus and his disciples move away from the crowds. When the disciples ask for further understanding, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus shares the last three parables.

The parable of the hidden treasure seems like a straight forward story until we really think about it. In first century Israel, buried treasures were not that uncommon (keep in mind, no banking system) so it wasn't unusual for someone to stumble across one.

The question here then, who can lay claim to the treasure? When we discover that the finder did not own the field, then all sorts of red flags begin to pop up. The Torah and rabbinic teaching lay out specific rules. If the finder is an employee and the finder is doing what is ordered and discovers the treasure in course of the work, then treasure belongs to the finder. However, if the employer has suggested part of the work is to find treasure, then the treasure belongs to the employer. Crossan points out that if the treasure in this parable belongs to the finder, then why buy the field? If the treasure doesn't belong to the finder, then buying the field is unjust.<sup>1</sup>

Treasure is a funny thing; treasure removes from us from our everyday lives. Brandon Scott writes that it is unearned and thereby lawless because it is a reward for not working. So this parable ultimately invites us to be suspicious of the finder because the story is incomplete.<sup>2</sup> In most treasure stories, the finder buys luxuries and then eats, drinks, and makes merry. In this story, the finder buys the field and keeps the treasure hidden; is the finder afraid to use the treasure for fear that its use might invite too many questions?

Is Jesus saying that the Kingdom of Heaven works outside the laws of everyday?

The parable of the merchant works in the opposite direction. The merchant is the actor of the story (thereby his action becomes the action of the Kingdom of Heaven) and he deliberately seeks to find pearls. When he finds the perfect pearl, he sells everything in order to possess it. For me, the question arises: what is the point of the purchase? If we extend the story to its logical conclusion, the merchant is eventually going to have to sell the pearl in order to eat and live. Is he willing to die to keep the pearl? What exactly is Jesus saying about the Kingdom of Heaven here?

The final parable, the net, is in the gospel writer's understanding a judgment parable. The gospel writer uses it to foreshadow the parable on the sheep and the goats in chapter 25 where those who have acted justly are sorted out from those who acted unjustly. Yet the metaphor is the net which catches everything; the sorting out seem ancillary to metaphor. So is Jesus really more concerned about the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven wraps everyone, all children of God, into its embrace, or is the parable really just a bumper sticker story: Catch 'em all and let God sort 'em out?

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p.399.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, pp. 401-402.

For me, a common thread runs through all these stories: the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't work the way we expect. If this third discourse correlates with the Torah, then we would be in the book of Leviticus. Of all the books of the Torah, Leviticus is most focused on ritual purity and Holiness Codes: mixing crops in fields, when women are unclean, whether your moldy house is unclean, or what not to eat. Yet, this collection of parables seems almost anti-Leviticus: a weed planted in a field, yeast, a woman who hides a contaminant, illicit treasure, a pearl of great value that becomes worthless, and a net full of good and bad fish.

Ultimately, though, Leviticus is about community; the purity codes are established so that people can live together in peace and harmony. Leviticus is where we hear that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that we are to extend compassion for the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land. We don't pick and choose who is our neighbor and we don't sort out the good alien from the bad alien, we feed them and extend hospitality.

The parables also seem to point us in the same direction; the Kingdom of Heaven embraces even the weedy, unlawful, and contaminated parts of our lives and the world. The Kingdom of Heaven doesn't seem to be about the judgment of good or bad, worth or worthlessness. The Kingdom of Heaven permeates through all aspects of our lives and the Lord of Love searches for all of us, to claim us and transform us regardless of whether the world judges us worthy. We discover that we are the pearl of great value for whom the Lord sacrifices everything.

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