

**Sermon Preached July 13, 2014 – The Kingdom of God, Buddhist Koans, and the Parables
Year A, Proper 10
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“A prisoner in jail received a letter from his wife: "I have decided to plant some lettuce in the back garden. When is the best time to plant them?" The prisoner, knowing that the prison guards read all the mail, replied in a letter: "Dear Wife, whatever you do, DO NOT touch the back garden! That is where I hid all the gold." A week or so later, he received another letter from his wife: "You wouldn't believe what happened. Some men came with shovels to the house, and dug up the whole back garden." The prisoner wrote another letter: ‘Dear wife, NOW is the best time to plant the lettuce!’”

Today’s gospel lesson is about a gardener sowing seeds on various types of soil. Jesus used this and other parables to explain the truth about the Kingdom of God. Jesus didn’t come to found a religion, or to create a list of morals, or sit in judgment on all of us. Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to help us understand our true nature and live into who it is we are called to be. In our prescribed lectionary readings we are now in the season of Matthew and will be for most of the rest of the year. Today and for the following two weeks our gospel lessons will be from Matthew chapter 13. This is the chapter of parables, and they are all about the Kingdom of Heaven. At the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew, 4:17, the first thing Jesus

does in his ministry is pick up where John the Baptist left off. It says Jesus began to proclaim “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” That is the framework around which he does everything in his life. Jesus proclaims the kingdom in word and deed.

These two words, “Kingdom” and “parable” are often misunderstood. So I’d like to spend most of my sermon today simply defining these two terms, and in the process begin to shed some light on this parable.

We’ll begin first with defining what Matthew calls “the Kingdom of Heaven.” Not surprisingly, most of us grew up understanding this to mean “heaven.” The Place we go when we die. So when we hear that Jesus is proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven, we immediately think this is another way of saying, “Jesus is telling us to be good so we will go to heaven when we die.” But this is a very small and misleading interpretation. If you look closely at how Jesus uses this expression in all the gospels, you see he is talking about a way of being, a way of living, that begins now, in this life. It is incomplete. It is imperfect. It won’t reach it’s fruition on earth until the end time. And we will certainly experience it fully in the next life, after death. But it is not ONLY about the next life, or the end times. The Kingdom starts now, with us, in this life.

Because we in the 21st century West don’t live in Kingdoms in the way that Jesus’ audience did, many theologians today have begun using the expression “The Reign of God” instead. Jesus came to proclaim a time when the earth will return to Original Blessing. When we will live as we were created to be. When God’s vision and reality prevail. And so Jesus shows us what this will look like: healed illnesses, no vengeance, love of enemies, love of neighbor,

compassion, and so on. The tricky thing is, this Reign of God is not simply a list of laws. It is much deeper and richer than that. It cannot be contained in a little box where you can say, “do everything in this box and you will enjoy the Reign of God.” The Reign of God is outside the box. That’s why it’s hard to write about it or describe it. It’s more of an experience, or an understanding beyond words. A way of being. That is why Jesus used signs, parables, healings, and lived examples of his behavior as the means to proclaim the Kingdom, the Reign of God.

Jesus’ parables have often been understood as straightforward stories to help us understand the point he wants to make. That they are to make complex ideas easier to comprehend. Parables use everyday objects like sheep, and wheat, and wind, and coins. We hear things like, “The Kingdom of God is like a treasure,” or “The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.” And so on. The problem with this understand is that parables are NOT straightforward or easy to understand. In fact they are meant to mess with our minds. They often start off sounding clear-cut, but then they go off in strange directions. Parables can be very confusing!

The theologian James Alison wrote about parables and said, “Jesus was indeed teaching about the arrival of something which is, for his listeners, very weird. That's why he has to teach in parables... That is, there is no direct understanding of the kingdom.”¹

For instance, in today’s “Parable of the Sower” Jesus tells the story of what happens to seeds when they fall on various sorts of soil. Most of the soil types don’t work very well and the seeds die. But one type of soil is very rich and brings forth an amazing harvest of 30, 60, and 100

¹ http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper10a.htm

fold! A straightforward reading might say that this means there are different kinds of people, like the soil. We are the soil and God is the sower. Some of us hear and respond to God's word and some don't. We need to try to be the good soil so we will hear the "word of the kingdom" and bear good fruit. The parable sounds like a moral lesson.

But if you start thinking about it, this Parable of the Sower is a little weird. First of all, what farmer in his right mind spreads seed without preparing the ground first? The proposition that a farmer would just randomly scatter seeds would strike Jesus' audience as crazy. A farmer would have plowed fields and put his seeds only in a place where he knew they were likely to grow, not simply throw them willy-nilly and see what happens! Jesus is describing what could be understood as extravagant farmer, who spreads his seed with abandon and generosity.

The Second odd thing about this parable is the amount of yield that is described. In the time of Christ it would be impossible to get a return of 30, 60, or 100 fold from a field! He's describing something completely unreal. When Jesus told this parable to his followers they were probably perplexed – what on earth could he mean by this? It's not a realistic story at all! And if so, what does that mean regarding the Reign of God?

There is a greater and greater consensus among theologians today that Jesus' parables were not designed to make things clear, so much as to make one think. They function somewhat like a Buddhist koan. They are not meant to be obvious, rather, they are more like riddles or word games, meant to shock us out of our complacency and see old things in new ways. God is beyond pat answers and straightforward words. Therefore there are many different

interpretations one may get from the parable of the sower. As well as lots of questions. GK Chesterson once wrote, “The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.”

For instance, if in the parable of the sower the soil is the people, we might start by looking at the disciples themselves. They are all very dull and confused. They don't understand the parable and say so, Jesus has to explain it to them, and even then they are unclear. Frankly, the disciples sound like the first kind of soil, the hard path, where the birds came and ate up the seeds. They don't get it. So according to the straightforward reading of Jesus' parable, the disciples themselves should be useless to him. Yet we know that despite their many flaws, over the course of their lives the disciples bore much fruit for the kingdom and were extraordinary messengers for Jesus. So if the seeds can fall on the hard path and still yield fruit, if people who don't understand the word can still be outstanding messengers of the gospel, what does that say about all of us? What does that say about the Reign of God?

And if the sower is sowing seed even on bad ground with reckless abandon, and we believe the sower is God sharing the good news and love of the Reign of God, then what does that say about how God treats all humanity? This is a vision of abundance. Does God share her love and word only with those who “deserve” it, or seem to have good inclinations, or even those whose soil is a little rocky? What does this tell us about hope? What does this tell us about lost causes? What does this tell us about the Reign of God?

Also, does the soil represent different kinds of people, or just different ways of being that can be found within all of us? Are there times of the day or different times in our life when we

are one soil or another? Are we in a position to judge the soil of others? What does this tell us about the Reign of God?

One interpretation which I found very powerful was one that looked at the crucifixion. Wasn't that a time of pure rejection? A time of the worst kind of soil? A soil that so rejected the message and life of the Reign of God that it killed the seed. Yet "it is only this rejection that in fact yields the fruit of the resurrection? ... it is precisely that act of rejection which God transforms into the fruit of new life."² So is there any condition of soil which is beyond the bearing good fruit? What does this tell us about the Reign of God?

Over the next two weeks we will explore more deeply Jesus' use of parables, how he sought to enlighten us to the reality of the Kingdom, and what that good news means for us today. Amen.

² http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper10a.htm