

Sermon Preached July 27, 2014 - Kudzu and the Parables
Year A, Proper 12
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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“Search for the LORD and his strength; continually seek her face.” (Ps 105:4). Amen.

HOW ENLIGHTENED ARE YOU? IF.. you can live without caffeine, If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains, If you can resist complaining, If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time, If you can take criticism and blame without resentment, If you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him or her, If you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend, If you can face the world without lies and deceit, If you can conquer tension without medical help, If you can relax without liquor, If you can sleep without the aid of drugs, If you can honestly say that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, gender preference, or politics... .. --Then you have almost reached the same level of spiritual development as your dog!

Our lectionary continues this week with more parables from the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew. This will be my third and final sermon in this series about the parables.

Two weeks ago we looked at the meaning of the phrase, “The Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” and learned that they are not talking about a place we go when we die, but are speaking about a reality we choose to inhabit in this life, the one that is continually breaking in. The Reign of God is whenever we live as though God is in charge and not our egos. The Reign of God is whenever love wins.

We also considered how the parables are not in fact simple moral stories, but are intended as odd stories with ambiguous meanings. That they function more like a Buddhist Koan than an Aesop's fable. Their meanings are not obvious, but are meant to open us up to various interpretations. The parables of Jesus were the way he could most accurately describe the Reign of God. God's reality is too magnificent to be explained by mere words. They are too limiting. Parables, stories that point to the truth of the glory of God, stories that leave space and unanswered questions for the complex reality of God to shine through, are ultimately more accurate than a simple black and white fable.

I am reminded of the wonderful poem by Emily Dickinson entitled, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." It goes:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

Then last week we looked at non-dual consciousness and how that influences our interpretations of the parables. While non-dualism is a term and idea often associated with the East, the fact is that Christianity is an Eastern religion and Jesus spoke to an audience who would

resonate with that understanding. That is, that there is a connectedness and one-ness of all things. Christians would say that humanity and all of creation are one with God. “Dual” thinking is the idea that something has to be “either/or.” That it’s either good or bad. Right or wrong. In contrast, non-dual thinking is open to accepting differences that realizes that we may not have all the answers to make either/or judgments. In the words of the theologian and mystic Richard Rohr non-dualism is “our ability to read reality in a way that is not judgmental, in a way that is not exclusionary of the part that we don’t understand.”

So now this week we’ve got another six parables to consider! But today we are only going to focus on the first two. But I encourage you to look at the other four on your own time and consider what they might be saying to you.

Have you ever visited the deep South? Places like Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama? One thing you often notice as you are driving along is a large and invasive vine called Kudzu. I believe it is indigenous to Japan, and some years ago was imported to the States as a decorative plant, where it absolutely thrived in the semi-tropical climate of the South East. A Kudzu vine can cover a home, or tree, or entire forest with its wide leaves. I bring up this weed because one of the parables we are going to look at is the “kudzu parable.”

Jesus says, “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.” To Jesus’ listeners, this was an odd parable because mustard is a weed. No one would sow mustard in his field. It would be like planting dandelions in your lawn. And when mustard grows

up it is not that big a shrub, certainly not a tree, nor do birds make nests in its branches. Rather, it is invasive. It is like kudzu; it's everywhere. It's hardy. It thrives. And yes, the seed is very small and unimpressive, and from small seeds something impressively vast and ubiquitous is created. What could Jesus mean by saying the Reign of God is like a mustard seed? Perhaps when the Kingdom first arrives it is small and unimpressive but great things result. At the same time, some people don't just look for it, they intentionally plant it, sow the Kingdom in their fields, their lives, their communities. Maybe it's not the largest of shrubs, but the most hardy. What does it mean to compare the Reign of God to a weed? The one that ultimately conquers all the other flora. Who are the birds in its branches? Are they us? Are they those who follow Jesus and his way? Are the nests they build mean they now live there, they inhabit the kingdom?

Jesus 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." Two of the odd components of this parable are that a woman was used to illustrate the Reign of God. Women had a lower status than men, so to use a woman's domestic task to illustrate the Almighty's Kingdom was unusual. What might this say about the standing of the genders in the Kingdom? About the role of human status? Another strange thing about the story is that "three measures of flour" is equivalent to sixty pounds! This woman was not making enough bread for her family, she was making enough for her whole village. This view of the Reign of God is one of abundance! And finally, the most accurate translation of the parable says that the woman "hid" the yeast in the flour. It's like saying the kingdom is hidden. It's small and unseen at first, like the mustard seed, like the yeast. But suddenly, everything it touches is changed. It grows light, it transforms the flour. Are we the flour? Is the world? Are our hearts changed when the yeast of

the kingdom touches us? Is the world leavened? How is that transformation like bread rising? What does that say to us about the relationship of the Kingdom to Jesus' body, to communion? Is the whole world fed?

Something both of these parables have in common is that the Reign of God starts off rather small and insignificant: a tiny seed, a sprinkling of yeast, hidden even. But in the end, the creation and all of us in it are transformed and the Reign of God is revealed. Maybe even small things we do for the kingdom can have unexpectedly large results. Maybe we need to sow the Kingdom in the fields around us. Maybe we need to think abundantly, leaven our own backyard, and see what results.

But the truth of the parables are meaningless if they remain in the abstract, so I started thinking about how to reword them to address the many contemporary concerns we have. For instance, thinking of the wonderful work of St. John's this coming week we could say, "The Kingdom of God is like the B-Safe program which lifts up children so that the inner cities might be healed." How is the B-Safe program like a mustard seed? Where do we see in it the Kingdom of God?

Thinking of the violence in the Holy Land we might say, "The Kingdom of God is like one parent giving up vengeance for the murder of her child, and through that action rose peace in the Middle East." How might forgiveness be like leaven?

Thinking of the border children who suffered such unspeakable horrors at home that they left their families to seek asylum, we might say. “The Kingdom of God is like one small law of compassion for refugee children, resulting in the saving of tens of thousands of lives.” How is mercy like the pearl of great price?

Thinking of the situation in Eastern Europe we could say. “The Kingdom of God is like one rebel fighter who laid down his weapon, refusing to kill, bringing forth the end of violence in Ukraine.” How is the courage for peace like a treasure hidden in a field? Could these things happen? How does God and God’s Kingdom work through the mustard seeds of our actions and prayers?

What parables could YOU write?

Amen.