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11 Pentecost – Proper 12

“The kingdom of heaven is like...” a mustard seed, yeast in flour, a hidden pearl, a net full of fish. Over and over Jesus reaches for pictures to try to help his first followers, and us, understand what it is he’s proclaiming. In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus asks his listeners, “Have you understood all this?” They respond with a definite “yes.” And we might well say the same: yes, the meaning is quite clear to us. But I wonder if that’s true.

One way of checking yourself on this is to ask, “Do I find his images disturbing, puzzling, perhaps even a bit off-putting?” If we don’t hear them that way, we may not be actually hearing them. It’s like the bumper sticker you may have seen: If you’re not outraged by what’s happening, you’re not paying attention.” In the case of the parables of Jesus, if we’re not at least a little offended, we probably aren’t tuning in to what he’s actually saying.

While there is almost certainly not one right way to interpret these stories, there is at least one way for each of us in which they are trying to grab us by our preconceptions and shake hard. They are not meant to comfort so much as to confront, not told to confirm us in our understanding of things, but to turn our understanding on its head. The very word ‘parable’ comes from the Greek, para-bollo, meaning ‘to throw’. Theologian Linda Bridges says that a parable is a story which “...in its great subtlety is thrown into our existence with tremendous power....and can throw the listener into a new mode of reality.”

The problem is that the images and comparisons used by Jesus are so ordinary sounding that it is easy for us to domesticate them. Take that mustard seed, for example. It sounds so tiny and cute, reminds us our saying ‘mighty oaks from little acorns grow.’ And the yeast mixed in with the flour makes me think of the pleasure of baking bread on a Saturday morning. Yet neither of these pictures we might conjure up compares accurately with the ways in which the parables would have been heard by those first listeners in Galilee.

Take the mustard seed, for example. It grows into a plant that is not just a pungent spice, but is actually a weed. It will spread through an entire field, choke out other plants, and be almost impossible to eradicate. It’s not so much a sign of little into big as a symbol of disorder overrunning things. Why, then,

would someone intentionally plant such a seed in one of his fields? How is that like the kingdom of heaven?

Or what about that yeast? In times right up until our own, yeast did not come in handy little pre-measured packages. It was made by taking a piece of bread, storing it in a damp, dark place and waiting for mold to form. Perhaps for this reason, in Jewish tradition yeast, or leaven, is seen as a sign of corruption. Unleavened bread is the sacred and holy which is eaten at the feast of Passover, after a thorough search of the household to get rid of the taint of leaven of any kind. So yeast is religiously impure. And of course women were religiously impure. So when Jesus talks of a woman mixing yeast into flour, this wasn't exactly a shiny-clean image of the kingdom of God.

And that is undoubtedly the point toward which Jesus was pushing us. The kingdom of heaven is not some nice, domesticated, orderly thing. From our human point of view it is intrusive, impolite, not very respectable. It is less like the pure notes of monks singing Gregorian chant, and a lot more like a bus-load of raucous adolescents belting out '99 bottles of beer on the wall.' This ought to raise for us the question of why such a kingdom would be a treasure for which one would want to give away everything.

The answer is not all that clear.....unless you happen to be one of the kind of people to whom Jesus was preaching: the peasants of Palestine. They would be seen, by those in charge of things, as unclean, disorderly and not very respectable. Jesus is not describing a kingdom for the present ruling elite, but for all who recognize the weediness in themselves.

This cuts even closer to the bone for us if we recognize the ways in which the world within which Jesus preached is like our own. Israel was part of the great Roman Empire, that mighty geopolitical military power ruling millions of people, where 2% of the population controlled essentially all the wealth and resources, and those who couldn't or wouldn't fit in were just so much dirt underfoot. It is to that empire that Jesus preaches the counter-reality of God's preferential option for the poor. I leave it to your imagination to consider the ways in which this description applies to our own world, our own national situation. But however we end up seeing ourselves on this spectrum of the haves and have-nots, it is surely clear that the kingdom of heaven is only deeply desirable for those who long for the kind of justice and peace that has never been available from any human structure, whether political, economic, national or religious.

I am most in touch with this reality every February when I go to Nicaragua for a week to serve as a physician. The experience begins as soon as we get off the plane in Managua, coming into a country which always and everywhere smells of smoke, from the wood fires over which almost everybody cooks, since they cannot afford gas or electricity for this. That fact of life translates into the astonishing rates of asthma and respiratory diseases which drain the life out of young and old.

Everywhere the water supply is hopelessly polluted, to the point where it is not just we gringos who get ill from drinking it. Nicaraguans rely on bottled water as well - assuming they can get it. Last year a mother and father walked hours to get to the clinic carrying their two year old daughter who had suffered from diarrhea and vomiting for three days. The child died within an hour of arriving in the clinic, and all the skills of our highly trained pediatricians from Hennepin County Medical could do nothing, because it was too late. An illness which would be a scandal of dirty water here, is only too common there.

This year I met the woman whom I think of as the Madonna of Jalapa. She was sitting in the tiny emergency section of the clinic cradling on her lap her two year old daughter whom she had carried seven hours down from her remote mountain community seeking some help for the child's seizures. While we could give the little girl anticonvulsants, the mother knew that ultimately she would have to carry her handicapped daughter back up the mountain, to go on coping with this tragedy by herself. The look of pain and intense sadness on her face reminded me of Michaelangelo's Pieta. As Jesus is crucified over and over in the violence of our world, so Mary continues to suffer for her children.

Every year I come home wanting to give away more of what I have, even knowing that I will never make a dent in the sum of misery in that one little town, let alone in the wider world. But I know to the bottom of my heart for whom Jesus preached God's upside down kingdom. And for that kingdom I want, within the limits of my sinful abilities, to give everything. The kingdom of heaven is not completed among us in this age, but it is the promised future. To be a part of yearning and praying for that future, part of surrendering oneself for its coming, is to be on the way toward God's promise fulfilled.

It's not a nice, polite, orderly kingdom with stained glass windows and high church solemnity. It's more like a riotous banquet, with songs and feasting way past everyone's bedtime, with slightly tipsy poets making up wonderful hymns of praise to the host, and the youngest children joining with the oldest

gray heads in laughing at silly jokes. It's the ultimate party where God will wipe away all tears, and fill us instead with the shared joy of mutual celebration. It's probably not what we would have thought up if we were making a kingdom. But it would be worth absolutely everything.