

Sermon for Sunday, 30 July 2023

Texts for Proper 12 A Track 2 Revised Common Lectionary [Proper 12, Year A \(lectionarypage.net\)](https://www.lectionarypage.net)

The Commonwealth of Heaven is like....a mustard seed, leaven hidden in flour, treasure hidden in a field, a merchant searching for fine pearls, a net thrown into the sea, a householder bringing out their treasures.

So. Many. Parables! In this one reading, and really, the pericope includes last week's parable (The Wheat and the Weeds) that we sort of got cut and pasted.

First, since we don't have a creed this week, you know that one of the reasons for the creed after the sermon is that if the preacher says something heretical in the sermon, you back it up with good theology in the creed! Since this is a healing service, we don't have the creed, but I do have a little info-mercial, or perhaps homework assignment.

As I was preparing for preaching here today, and for the weekly parish Bible Study where I'm serving, I found these two texts particularly helpful: *The Kingdom of Heaven is Like....* by Thomas Keating, who's a Cistercian monk. It's a book of reflections on the parables.

Before you read that, I would commend *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* by Dr. Amy-Jill Levine. She's a Jewish New Testament scholar and a professor at Vanderbilt University, and an excellent antidote to the sometimes subtle anti-Semitism, or just plain error regarding ancient and present Jewish practice and custom.

The first thing that occurs to me when I hear or read parables is to wonder about the context—what do I know about what is going on in the background, and what do I need to know more about to better understand the parable. That IS starting with the idea that I could, maybe, understand the parable.

Jesus is telling these parables to the crowds, and then to his disciples, in a time of occupation by the Roman Empire. The parables lay the Kingdom of Israel, traditional home to the People of God, alongside the Empire (Kingdom!) of Rome, and then also alongside the Kingdom of Heaven—the Commonwealth of God. It would not be strange for a rabbi in those days to tell stories about the Kingdom of

God. Some of the pictures Jesus uses might be peculiar, which is to say, particular to Jesus, but, the more reading I do in traditional Jewish teachings and the ancient history of Jewish and Christian practice, the more Jesus looks like a not atypical Jewish preacher and teacher. This is to say that what Jesus says squares with Jewish tradition and teaching.

In The Parable of the Mustard Seed, the sower deliberately plants an invasive bushy weed in their field, and it grows like mad to become home to the birds of the air. This humble snapshot of the Commonwealth of God—God’s realm on earth—is laid beside the contemporary picture of the Kingdom of Israel/the People of God standing like the stately cedars of Lebanon (think California redwoods for something a little closer to home!), and the day to day reality of the colonial Empire of Rome. The exiled and returned and colonized People of God make their nests in the capacious branches of the mustard tree. At the end of the telling of this parable in Godly Play, we wonder about where this place, this mustard tree with all the birds hanging out in the branches and making their nests, could really be, and if the sower and the birds are happy there.

Hold on to that snapshot!

The Commonwealth of God is like leaven hidden in a really, really, really big batch of flour by a woman who is making more bread than her family could possibly eat in a day. Those three measures of flour, also (all together) known as an ephah, show up a bunch of times in Scripture—the amount Sarah uses to make bread to feed the angel guests who arrive and foretell to Abraham the birth of Isaac; what Hannah brings to the temple as an offering following the birth of her son, Samuel; she also brings a three year old bull and a skin of wine, to list just two. It feels like there’s a connection here between these big quantities of flour and the celebration of new life. An ephah of flour or grain is an abundant, extravagant amount—enough to feed a person for ten days. It is raised by a tiny bit of leaven **hidden** in it, and becomes something wonderfully different from what it started out as.

Notice I don’t call it yeast. I expect that most of us think of yeast as something fairly tidy that we can obtain in packets or a jar at the grocery store. In those days, there was no isolated, packaged yeast. Bread was leavened by wild yeast that was endemic in the air, and could be collected and stored from one baking to the

next—and often in Scripture, when leaven is referred to, it’s a negative thing because it’s kind of infectious—think sour dough starter without refrigeration.

While the NRSV (the New Revised Standard Version—the translation of Biblical texts we use in worship) says “mixed,” the Greek for what happens to the leaven is “*enkrypto*,” which, like it sounds, comes from a root that means “to hide.” Like encryption. (Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus, Leaven* p. 120)

Which brings us to the Treasure which is Hidden in the Field, which the laborer digs us, and re-hides, so he can buy the field and so own the treasure—which he can’t dig up quite yet so his trickery isn’t obvious.

And the merchant, who clearly isn’t really much of a merchant if when he finds the pearl of great value sells everything so that he might have that one pearl. Not a great business move!

The nature of parables is that while they are grounded in the common or familiar, there’s something in them that doesn’t quite fit, and is a little off. Which is fine, because they’re parables and not news stories or scientific papers!

What can we make of these stories?

First, I’m going to propose a little holy algebra. Of the “if $A = B$ and $B = C$ then $A = C$ ” kind of equation. (That’s transitive equality for those of you for whom these things are important!)

The People of God have been enjoined, historically, to live in ways that demonstrate love of God, and love of neighbor/self. Never mind the success rate—or lack of success. Arguably, the People of God are connected to the Kingdom of Israel, demonstrating love of God, neighbor/self. Jesus identifies himself with the Reign of God come near, the Kin-dom of God, and if we, as the Body of Christ, participate in the Reign of God come near, members of the Kin-dom of God, there’s arguably some holy algebra (or is it math?) there.

I wonder if all these different parables, these snapshots of the Commonwealth of God, the Kin-dom of God make it more accessible to everyday folks?

Amy-Jill Levine says, “...perhaps the parable tells us, that despite all our images of golden slippers and harps and halos, the kingdom is present at the communal oven of a Galilean village **when everyone has enough to eat**. It is present...in

everything, and it is available to all,It is something that works its way through our lives and we realize its import only when we do not have it.” (ibid p. 125) (emphasis mine)

I believe this is true, whether we are hearing about baking bread, finding treasure in a field, making questionable choices when planting a garden, looking for valuable pearls, fishing, or pulling our treasures out of storage and surveying them. God’s Commonwealth is present, at hand. Hidden, perhaps, but there for the seeking.

I think it is not such a long step to go from the Commonwealth or Kin-dom of God at hand in our daily life and work to the call to reconcile all creation to God through the healing (or repair) of the universe which is the mission of the church (and is known in present day Jewish practice, without the church part, of course, as tikkun olam.)

Jesus calls us, like the scribes trained for the Commonwealth of God in that last sliver of a parable that gets hidden at the end of this reading, and often not credited as a parable—scribes were the teachers (or lawyers) trained to interpret and apply Scripture, particularly Mosaic law— Jesus calls us, like the scribes trained for the Commonwealth to bring out the treasure of God’s wisdom—both the old and the new.

Because the old treasures of God’s wisdom, like that in Mosaic law, continue to be wise and good and true, but sometimes we need to hear them differently, in a new way. (Noting that new is not better than old, just different for a different time.)

The lesson from the Letter to the Romans points from the old to the new. In the work of restoring creation to God, **we** (in community!) are called by God through Christ to participate in Jesus’s work of bringing the Commonwealth, the Kin-dom of God, to light. As we participate in Jesus’s work, we and creation are restored in our relationship to one another and to God. [Commentary on Romans 8:26-39 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

And in the midst of this, even when the going is rough and painful, we know that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

Radical transformation by something which seems small or insignificant, hidden away from the eyes of the world, “by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,.... (from Ephesians 3:20-21).

Amen.

--The Rev. Kit Wang