

20 Pentecost
Proper 22
October 2, 2005

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable."....Well, my first instinct, for my first sermon at St. Philip's is to say,let's look at the Epistle shall we?"

For the past few Sundays we've been hearing parables describing the Kingdom of Heaven, and we have a few more parables coming at us for the next couple of weeks. We've heard of the king who wished to settle accounts with his servants; the householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard; the man who wanted his two sons to work in the vineyard; today we hear of the householder who planted a vineyard; Next week we'll hear of the king who gave a marriage feast for his son. All of these parables are stories that we need in order to make attempts to describe the indescribable. The Kingdom of God. These parables are a mystery, that's for sure.

Here at St. Philip's on Wednesdays at 11:30 a.m. we have an adult Bible study class. We gather for an hour to reflect on the upcoming readings for Sunday. For the past few weeks we have been tackling these parables in depth. To our depths, we are gathered in conversation each week seeking to find the Kingdom of Heaven. Can it be described?

No, not completely.

The writers of the Gospel report that Jesus used common images in describing the Kingdom of God: vineyards, mustard seeds, shepherds with their sheep, wedding banquets, servants, sons. A parable usually portrays two points or levels of reality, one from daily life and one from a more transcendent level. A parable puts together these two distant points and invites us to understand why. We go back and forth in reflecting on these mysterious connections --from the everyday to the divine and hopefully that sets us up to be open to discovery. Layers of meaning are revealed to us as we go along, as we move from age to age.

Downstairs in our Godly Play Rooms, the kids reflect on parables all the time. Are these parables meaningful for children? The parables stories are kept in these gold boxes, the parables are presented as gifts that have been given, gifts with lids that must be opened and explored. The storytellers go back and forth with the children, between the ordinary and the divine, offering reflections and inviting the children to dwell on what the parable is saying to them. This creates a safe space for discovery; a place to help children understand there is forever something for them to discover in the parables.

It is the nature of a parable to leave the door open for further discovery. If we say to the children, or each other, "This is the meaning..." by words or by our attitude, we will stop looking for anything else. "Been there, done that, ." If we profess to have the answers, the parable becomes something that's finished. How we reflect on the parables

must point us to deeper reflection.

So what if we were to approach these parables that we've been hearing with questions marks, instead of periods? What if we were to approach these strange stories with wondering questions? Wonder is a very serious thing that, rather than leading us away from reality, can lead us TO reality. If we skim over these strange foreign stories we will never be surprised by them.

So, let's return to today's parable. A rather violent sort of a story to be sure. One that's meant to shake us up and put us on edge. It feels contrary to the loving Spirit of Jesus. It's also a parable that takes me right to the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd, a crowd that will soon declare, "Crucify Him." I've always wondered, how did these people so quickly move from acclamation to condemnation? Each year as we hear the Passion on Palm Sunday I think to myself that the crowd in the Passion were woefully fickle.

Since this book of Matthew was authored after the destruction of the Temple, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, this allegorical parable we hear today has the benefit of some hindsight. I think we can accept that the vineyard is Israel, that the tenants are the religious authorities, that the slaves are prophets, and that the son is Jesus. This parable draws heavily from the OT reading today from Isaiah recalling vineyards and watchtowers, scripture imagery that was recognizable to the listeners in the time of Jesus.

If we try to limit this parable to the reality of Jesus' day, we can draw some finite conclusions. This parable comes just as the Passion narrative is opening. It explains to the audience why God sent Jesus and the prophets before him (to bring repentance); it explains what will happen to Jesus (he'll be murdered); it explains who will bring about this destruction (the religious leaders of Jerusalem); and it describes what the consequences will be if the leaders do not repent; (the world/Israel will be destroyed). Obviously to those who seek to know, the stories aren't just tales about agricultural living in Israel.

Jesus tells us in Mark when the disciples ask him what's with all these parables, Jesus says, "to you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables. In order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." The telling of parables draws listeners in as "insiders", ones who are able to know that they are to wonder what these stories Really Mean.

That was then, this is now. Surely Jesus wouldn't admonish the leaders of the church today? Would he? Me? I produce fruits of the Kingdom, don't I? What could Jesus possibly have to say to me that might put me on edge? Or am I an insider...one who gets

the deeper levels of these parables. I wonder. If we were downstairs with the children during Godly Play, we'd end this reading of the Gospel with wondering questions.

I wonder where this vineyard might really be?

I wonder who the chief priests really are?

I wonder.

When you are at home later today, reread this Gospel. Read it as if you are a leader of the established church. Clearly Jesus was directing this parable to the chief priests of his day. But aren't we also leaders of the established church in our day? How do we regard the prophetic voices of our time? Is there any smashing and rejecting going on in our church? If the oppressed among us are indeed prophetic, are we listening to this cautionary tale with them and us in mind?

Jesus, via the writers of the Gospel of Matthew, directed his comments to the chief priests of his day, faithful people - or so they thought- and Jesus told them that the Kingdom of God would be taken away from them. That disturbs me. The writers of Matthew knew that the chief priests would seek to prevail. They wanted to preserve their religious tradition, to stand guard against false prophets. Is that so terrible? Doesn't their age-old desire to prevail call to us too? I know that I'm guilty . I'm a chief priest wanna be. On so many levels, I'm a chief priest wanna-be.

Thanks be to God we know that Jesus Christ prevailed. The stone that the builders rejected is our chief cornerstone. It is the Lord's doing and it is amazing.

Now I wonder.....Who are the people who produce the fruits of the Kingdom? I wonder.

Maria Hoecker , preacher

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