

3 Pentecost-B 14 June, 2015

Ezekiel 17:22-24

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Mark 4:26-34

Permit me to state the obvious. Permit me to make an understatement: the parables of Jesus are hard. They are. Sure, you get a few good ones that are great stories and pretty easy to understand—the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Prodigal Son. But mostly they're tricky, hard to figure out. They're hard to preach on. I remember being in sermon study back in the fall when the parable of the wise and foolish maidens was our gospel lesson and all five of us pastors gathered decided this might be a good Sunday to preach the Psalm.

And come to think of it, I'm especially fond of Psalm 92, the one we just said: "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon... In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright; God is my rock..." This is lovely language and it echoes the agrarian themes that we get in our Ezekiel reading and the gospel.

But as much as I'd like to switch out the parables from today's gospel and preach on something a little more accessible, I won't. Because obviously it was important for Jesus to talk to his followers in these encoded stories. "He did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples" we are told. And we need to remember in mind that teaching in parables was common in the Hebrew world.

But what exactly is a parable? The Hebrew word "mashal" is from a verb meaning to compare. And the Greek word, "parable" itself means to "throw alongside;" in other words, to talk about one thing in terms of another. The parables' meaning, therefore, is intentionally elusive and, as we see in Mark, intended to separate insiders in the community, those who can understand the meaning of the parables, from those for whom the parables are impenetrably befuddling.

Earlier in chapter 4, Jesus is talking with his disciples and he says, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables;" Then he goes on to quote the prophet Isaiah, saying that he teaches in parables in order that—and this is the Isaiah--"they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

So which group of hearers are we? The insiders who can fathom the meaning or the outsiders, the lost ones, who cannot?

Don't worry; that's a rhetorical question. Because we must keep in mind that we're not hearing parables in the historical context in which Jesus was telling them. And because of that, we will hear them differently and we will fathom a different kind of meaning from them. Sometimes the meaning will run counter to how we view the work of Jesus, as in the parable of the wise and foolish maidens,

when it appears that half of the wedding party is to be excluded because of their unworthiness; that's certainly not how we understand the radical hospitality of Jesus.

Sometimes the meaning will leave us confused. For example, we talk a lot about having "faith the size of a mustard seed" as if that's good thing because from the teensy little mustard seed comes a big, scrubby bush. But a *bush*? Honestly? And the mustard bush was a *weed* in the Middle East. How much more majestic it would have been if Jesus had said, as the Psalmist said, "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon..." You can get down with the lovely imagery of palm trees and cedars. But seriously, a mustard bush?

And of course, in an earlier parable in Mark, there is more agrarian imagery. Remember this parable from the first part of chapter 4?

*'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'* And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Well, we have ears and we have heard, but we still find ourselves wondering about the exact meaning of this parable. And of the ones we get in our reading today, I think if there is any clear gospel news, it comes in verses 26 and 27: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."

Pastors in particular, take comfort in this passage because in many ways we view writing and preaching sermons, praying with people, teaching adult fora as "scattering seeds." The comfort comes in knowing that it is the act of scattering that we are responsible for, not the outcome of the growth or withering of the seeds.

But indeed that is true for all Christians, not simply pastors. We are called to live as the body of Christ, called to do good works—as we are reminded in Ephesians, "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." And in the doing of good works, we are scattering the seeds of God's love, not caring as much about the outcome, over which we have no control.

It's kind of a pity, really, that the reading from 2 Corinthians didn't come from the fourth chapter rather than the fifth. Because it's in the fourth chapter that we get the brilliant imagery of the clay jar:

*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*

Early on in my ministry I found this passage deeply comforting when conflicts arose in my first call, a very difficult call. I felt it freed me from the need to worry and second-guess myself and doubt myself. Rather I was called to announce the good news of Christ; I couldn't control the effect it had or the non-effect it had.

So as with the sower casting seed to the ground. We are called to be faithful in our lives, but we are not called to be successful and the outcome doesn't depend on us.

This, in itself, is a kind of radical grace.

Some years ago, the poet, farmer and environmental activist, Wendell Berry, brought out a book of poems called *Sabbaths*. Berry, who describes himself as "a person who takes the Gospel seriously," has been critical of Christians for failing to challenge cultural complacency about environmental degradation. The poems in *Sabbaths* were written over the course of seven years and they deal with his sense of spirituality and care of the earth. In the poem I'm going to close with, notice how he references the parable of the sower, seeing ourselves as stewards and farmers who must go forth to plant with a vision. Besides vision, we need to have, as he puts it a willingness to sweat, a willingness to ache, and a willingness to harvest. But for the growth, which he calls "great work," of what has been planted, we are not responsible. That "great work" is God's work. And it happens while we sleep.

In his concluding lines he says, "When we work well, a Sabbath mood /rests on our day and finds it good."

Here is Wendell Berry, writing of the sower of seeds:

Whatever is foreseen in joy  
Must be lived out from day to day.  
Vision held open in the dark  
By our ten thousand days of work.  
Harvest will fill the barn; for that  
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.  
And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace. That we may reap,  
Great work is done while we're asleep.  
When we work well, a Sabbath mood  
Rests on our day, and finds it good. Amen.