

Sermon, July 16, 2023

Matthew 13:1-9

“A Biblical Guide to Gardening”

Jesus was a very good storyteller. In fact, when asked a question he would rarely give a straight answer, but, instead, he would offer a parable. But what is a parable? Biblical scholar, Douglas Hare, says that it is “like a riddle, intended to tease the mind into insight rather than to communicate a simple idea by means of an illustration.” Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, states that they “are meant to reveal the kind of transformation necessary for those who would follow Jesus to participate in the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, Jesus seems to have wanted us to think upon these things, to grasp the varied nuances, to seek out the reality, rather than just accept something at face value.

This parable has to do with what Jesus refers to as “the word of the kingdom”, (Matt.13:18). And when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, he never offers a straight answer. For example, the parable of the mustard seed, which reads, “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 and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matt.13:31) This is followed by the parable of the yeast. “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.” (Matt. 13:33) Notice that both tell of something that is small but grows in size. We can look at that in two ways. First, that the kingdom is present by virtue of Jesus’ presence but is yet to be fulfilled. Secondly, it can refer to the fact that we may understand a little at first, but as we grow spiritually our perception of the kingdom grows. Remember his well-known statement in John 3 - “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”. This suggests that our spiritual growth opens our eyes to the reality of the kingdom with the aid of God’s Holy Spirit.

This morning’s reading is followed by the rare instance when Jesus, beginning at verse 18, explains the meaning of the parable. Notice, as well, that he tells the parable to a crowd gathered on a beach, but he only explains its meaning to his disciples. They, of course, will be equipped with setting the foundation of the Church.

The seeds that are sown on the path, are those that are sown in the heart, but, as Jesus says, are snatched away by the “evil one” This places a supernatural spin on the tale.

The one who sows on rocky ground speaks of one who embraces the world of the kingdom for a while, but which eventually fades away. I am reminded of times spent in charismatic churches, where there were those who cherished what they called 'mountaintop experiences', but when such experiences seemed to dry up the faith seemed to dry up with them. It is wise to keep in mind that the purpose of the Spirit is not to titillate us emotionally, but to help us open our eyes to the reality of the kingdom - to better understand what it requires of us.

The one who sowed among thorns represents us when "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing". We do live in a troublesome world, but we cannot let that divert us from what Jesus calls us to, nor allowing our own anxieties to block our perception of the needs, pains, and sufferings of others.

Take note as well of Jesus referring to "the lure of wealth". So much of what Jesus had to say points to the tensions between wealth and poverty. Hauerwas suggests that this has a lot to do with the current state of the Church in the West. This may be the case when we look to those places in the southern reaches of the world, such as, Latin America, South America, and Africa, where there is great poverty, and where the Church is growing like wildfire, compared to us in the industrialized world where the Church is shrinking. Perhaps we have grown too comfortable to fully grasp the meaning of the kingdom!

Hauerwas also made a statement that really caught my eye, and which I will have to give further thought. He writes, "A church that is shrinking in membership may actually be a church in which the soil of the gospel is being prepared in which deeper roots are possible." We can only hope and pray.

Lately, I have been doing some reading in the early Church Fathers, and considering the world in which they were living, writing, and preaching - a world where the Church was under attack from many directions, including sporadic and brutal persecutions, yet was able to flourish and grow. Perhaps, if today's Church finds a way to sow on fertile soil, it can do the same! Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal One, author of life universal, we offer our thanksgiving for all that we are blessed with and ask that you help us bless you with all that we say and do. You gave to us a means of revelation through your Son Jesus so that we may come to better understand you, and to serve you accordingly. Through the one we call Christ we find a better pathway for our lives, a pathway grounded in compassion, mercy, peace, and love. Jesus spoke to us in parables of a kingdom that is both present and yet to come. In the power of your Holy Spirit may we find the eyes to see and the ears to hear that we may truly be prepared to serve you through service to others, especially those in need. Help us to honor this planet, our home within the cosmos, through better stewardship and care for all forms of life upon it. Show us the ways of peace, and give to us the faith, the courage, and the patience to see them through. Lead us so that the Church can be a beacon of hope for all.... Amen.