

“Room For All”

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Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

[Jesus said,]

[The mustard seed is] the smallest of all seeds.

But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants.

It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches.”

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to visualize how we can make room for your Kingdom to be.

Show us how there are more ways than one

for your beloved community to happen.

Amen

One of the most basic needs we have as human beings is to find meaning in life,
to help us make sense of the world, to believe there are patterns we can anticipate
to give us clues how to make our choices and live our lives.

We look to the Bible to give us insights for that meaning we seek,
believing there are messages from God for us personally.

Last summer, the Gospel lessons assigned by the lectionary
appeared to me to be a theme of *hospitality as a form of evangelism*.

These texts helped me see evidence in scripture to support the theories of
two contemporary scholars, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg,
about how Christianity spread as a religious movement
from the Middle East throughout the Roman Empire.

Starting in June a year ago, there was the story about Jesus as a guest for a meal
in the house of a Pharisee where a woman anointed him with oil,
which gave Jesus the opportunity to point out how
inhospitable the host had been to him.

Then, there was the sending out of 72 missionaries
with elaborate instructions about *what not to take* on the journey –
Jesus also told them not to get involved with other travelers,
presumably to keep their focus on reaching out to householders
and to be good guests of those for those who would take them in.

Even so, this was followed by the parable of the good Samaritan
who did show hospitality to a wounded Judean traveler.

The ‘table hospitality’ of Martha and Mary provided another glimpse of
Jesus’ itinerant lifestyle as a sojourning teacher – like those 1st Century ‘skeptics’
whom church member Dale Suttoff often tells us about at Bible study.

Willard, p.2

There was another *meal with a Pharisee* where Jesus did a healing,
and a meal illustrating Jesus' habit of eating with undesirables,
like tax collectors and sinners.

The parable about the corrupt steward and landlord –
though not directly related to hospitality, serves to illustrate
the tension between the Roman overlords and their Judean caretakers.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar
further served to illustrate the social reality of the 1st Century CE.

This summer, the Gospel lessons from the lectionary
have been a series of Jesus' parables about God's Kingdom of Heaven.

Two weeks ago, the Gospel lesson was the parable of the Sower,
in which the 'word of the Kingdom' was described as a seed
that is planted everywhere and anywhere.

Last week, it was another agricultural parable about a farmer who sowed good seed and
patiently endured the treachery of an enemy who also planted weeds.

Today, the Gospel lesson includes six parables about the 'Kingdom'
which I will outline for you shortly.

These parables don't have much in common – other than beginning with the phrase,
'The kingdom of heaven is like...'

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... It's the smallest of all seeds.
But... becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."
Matthew 13:31-32

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when
something small grows to become someplace big –
like a small group that gets together to start a church
or a democracy that becomes a great nation
or heaven itself as a place where we can sing and fly – like birds or angels.

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in... flour
until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough."
Matthew 13:33

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when
a good idea is in the mix like a catalyst to cause growth and create good things –
like a birthday cake or a crystal or a community garden.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field,
which someone else found and... sold everything [they owned to buy] that field."
Matthew 13:44

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when someone writes a book that inspires
someone to find their calling or when someone who creates a legacy
to benefit future generations or it can be Heaven itself.

Willard, p.3

“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

When he found one very precious pearl, he... sold all... he owned and bought it.”

Matthew 13:45-46

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when

someone shows up in our lives who is the ‘treasure’ itself –

a teacher or a lover who searches for hidden treasure in everyday life

and brings love and inspiration like a string of pearls to everyone around them.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net

that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish.

When it was full, they pulled it to the shore,

where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers.

But the bad fish they threw away.

Matthew 13:47-48

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when

a network is established by pulling together to bring in a diverse group of people

like Face Book online or a Bible study or worlds we haven’t imagined yet

where people go with the flow – like fish or angels.

This parable also speaks about consequences where there are

rewards for the ‘good’ who get their own place

and exclusion for the ‘bad’ who get nowhere.

“The kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household

who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.”

Matthew 13:49

So, the kingdom of heaven can happen when

someone is trained to be a good leader and teacher who knows how to share

good things from ancient tradition and knows how to welcome new ideas.

I thought I might find a another pattern beyond the phrase of

‘the kingdom of heaven is like...’ such as a unifying theme, a ‘unifying the truth’,

but what really appears to be the case is

that these parables are not intended to be connected to each other,

not intended to fit in a nice neat box labeled the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’.

Instead, they are meant to open up our thinking...

We need to reclaim creativity to help us interpret what these texts have to tell us –

imagination can be a very helpful tool.

Some may wander off on wild tangents that are false, or dangerous –

as extremists of all types demonstrate on a regular basis.

So, imagination as a way of interpretation must be tempered

by scholarship about our tradition as well as a consensus that we are of a Spirit

that rooted in rational loving-kindness – in which case we can correct

imaginative interpretations by asking, “Does it work, or not?”

Willard, p.4

It has occurred to me that this whole cycle of parables –
each with its own imagery and lesson, are actually a constellation of possibilities
for how the Kingdom of Heaven can happen.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not just one thing – it is not a single reality,
but a complex combination of possibilities, of worlds – a constellation.

Though these parables are different and may seem unconnected,
they describe a reality of worlds within worlds and a world beyond worlds.

The parable of the mustard seed is like other parables that use an agricultural theme,
but its image of a tree that is home for many birds –
even many different kinds of birds, reminds me of John 14:2 (KJV)...

In my Father's house are many mansions:

if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.
and John 10:16(NRSV)...

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.
So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Our church is built on traditions that have been handed down through the generations
and creativity for interpreting our faith allows us
as Christians of the United Church of Christ
to reclaim those traditions, even to see old ways in a new light.

Eastern Orthodox Christians venerate Christ and the saints
using sacred paintings called ‘icons’ –
which are not just little pictures on your computer.

Iconography is a wonderful way to learn about the people of the Bible.

Roman Catholics have a rich tradition of prayer,
such as the Jesuit discipline of guided imagery –
which is another way to meet Christ.

Pentecostal Christians celebrate the joy of the Spirit through ecstatic speech
called glossolalia – which Paul described as spiritual ‘tongues’.

African-American Baptists have a tradition of dramatic preaching;

‘mainline’ Protestants in general, are known for the ‘Protestant work ethic’;
while Quakers and Mennonites are known for their non-violence,
and Unitarian Universalists for their openness to truth.

All these are derivative of Christianity through the centuries,
but Jesus’ mustard tree, the ‘house of many mansions’, his sheep of other folds,
all suggest Heaven is an interfaith constellation as well.

I am reminded of that joke where a Methodist, a Catholic, and a Jew are being given
a tour of Heaven by St Peter who guides them to where they will be staying,
and warns them to be quiet when they pass by the Baptist enclave,
“Because they think they’re the only ones here!”

Willard, p.5

Though Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have different spiritual doctrines
yet they – like all the other major world religions,
share the Golden Rule in one form or another.

The great religions complement each other because they emphasize different truths;
For example, in Christianity, we say Jesus is the ‘light of the world’
while in Buddhism, Buddha is ‘the eye of the world’.

These are concepts that don’t contradict each other, but work together.

Creativity is part of the Good News.

Creativity needs to be reclaimed.

There is no one way, but limitless ways to be the ‘Kingdom’,
just like there are limitless ways to show love.

In the end, love is all that matters.

Even Jesus’ death on the cross became the ultimate, defining – and defiant,
image of God lifted up with arms outstretched as a loving embrace.

A butterfly pinned against the tree of life for all the world to see
his undefeated love and un-deflected beauty.

We are faced with many challenges in life –
personal, social, and national, played out in one’s own mind,
your neighborhood, and on the world stage.

There are many people trying to make a difference,
but not enough people working together
to make something, build something, create something!

Our creativity is linked to one of the most basic definitions in our religious tradition
of what it means to be human.

We are created in the image of our Creator,
and we have the ability ourselves to create – and re-create ourselves.

These six parables talk about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven
as a place, as a person, as something that happens, as something that is done –
in short, the Kingdom happens as you are living life,
being who you are without pretense, in all your wild diversity
as you seek meaning and love.

We have only to discover that ‘Kingdom’ within ourselves, the gift of who we are –
talents and skill honed by experience, just as Jesus did with his disciples
as they watched his example and listened to his parables.

As each of us work to make our gift happen,
we free up others to do the same and transform the world
to be that beloved community that is possible ‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.

Amen

*Our lesson today comes from Romans 8:26-39
in which Paul describes the role of the Holy Spirit
in sharing our path and our pain as we go along our life journey.
We are also assured that we are connected to the Spirit of God in Christ through love
and that connection can never be broken.*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

[26] In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness.

We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself
pleads our case with unexpressed groans.

[27] The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks,
because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will.

[28] We know that God works all things together for good
for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

[29] We know this because God knew them in advance,
and he decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of his Son.
That way his Son would be the first of many brothers and sisters.

[30] Those who God decided in advance would be conformed to his Son, he also called.
Those whom he called, he also made righteous.
Those whom he made righteous, he also glorified.

[31] So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

[32] He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.

Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

[33] Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them.

[34] Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died,
even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side.

It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.

[35] Who will separate us from Christ's love?

Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine,
or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

[36] As it is written,

We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

[37] But in all these things we win a sweeping victory
through the one who loved us.

[38] I'm convinced that

nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord:

not death or life, not angels or rulers,

not present things or future things, not powers

[39] or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

[31] [Jesus] told another parable to them:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
that someone took and planted in his field.

[32] It’s the smallest of all seeds.

But when it’s grown, it’s the largest of all vegetable plants.

It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches.”

[33] He told them another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast,
which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour
until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.”

[44] “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field,
which someone else found and covered up.

Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.

[45] “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

[46] When he found one very precious pearl,
he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.

[47] “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net
that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish.

[48] When it was full, they pulled it to the shore,
where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers.

But the bad fish they threw away.

[49] That’s the way it will be at the end of the present age.

The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people,

[50] and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace.

People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

[51] “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

They said to him, “Yes.”

[52] Then he said to them, “

Therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple
for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household
who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.”

Last week:

Matt. 13:24-30

The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field.

While people were sleeping, an enemy came and
planted weeds among the wheat and went away.

The week before:

Matt. 13:18-23

[18] “Hear then the parable of the sower.

[19] When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,
the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in [their] heart;
this is what was sown along the path.

[20] As for what was sown on rocky ground,
this is [the one] who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;
[21] yet ... has no root in [oneself], but endures for a while,
and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,
immediately... falls away.

[22] As for what was sown among thorns,
this is [the one] who hears the word,
but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word,
and it proves unfruitful.

[23] As for what was sown on good soil,
this is [the one] who hears the word and understands it;
[this one] indeed bears fruit, and yields,
in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”