

Everything Belongs

A sermon by

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Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I got to give a version of the sermon you are about to hear at the 8:30 service this morning. After the service was over I stood at the back of the sanctuary speaking to people as they left. One man, whom I did not recognize, handed me a piece of paper and said, “Read this when you get home.”

Of course, I didn’t wait until I got home. As soon as I went back into the sacristy, I opened and read it. The note said:

“I have been attending church all of my life and have heard hundreds, if not thousands of sermons. Never, however, have I heard a sermon that gripped me as much as the one you preached today.”

Of course, that person didn’t know how to spell “gripped.”

It is not, of course, my desire for any of you to leave here griping about the sermon or any other thing having to do with this wonderful church and its community.

I don’t know what needs or hopes you have brought into this sacred space today. But, I want you to leave here comforted, encouraged, strengthened, consoled, energized, hopeful, nurtured and motivated to leave here committed to practice kindness, generosity and justice to the various places where you go when you leave here.

And yet, and yet - being faithful to Jesus and being committed to passing along his teachings does put the preacher in the precarious position of being offensive. The fact is that much of what Jesus said and did was offensive to those who first heard him - at least to those who were in power, both religious and political power. Though Jesus offered comfort and compassion to those who were on the bottom, he tried to open the eyes of those on the top - those who had the power and made the rules. And, more often than not he exercised this Jewish prophetic role in ways that really upset those very people. Indeed, he was so offensive that he got himself drummed up on false charges and executed. And, it wasn’t for saying, “Consider the lilies of the field.”

This parable that you just heard read from Matthew’s narrative of the Jesus story is among the most radical teachings Jesus ever offered. Of course, over the

centuries the church has so de-clawed both Jesus and his message, domesticated him and his teachings, that the offensive stuff is mostly gone.

The story we call “The Parable of the Good Samaritan” has become a story about a nice guy who had compassion for a man who was the victim of gang violence. You know it. A man was set upon by robbers and left for dead. Some from the religious establishment passed by and saw this but they really did have prior important commitments. Fortunately a nice Samaritan guy came by, saw the victim, took him to the nearest Day’s Inn, gave the manager his American Express card and said, “Spend whatever is necessary to take care of him.” What a guy!

Then there is the story we call “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” A young man can’t or doesn’t want to go off to college. Maybe his SATs weren’t high enough. He asks for what inheritance would have been his anyway, gets it and goes off to make it on his own. But, he can’t. He parties too much. Finds out he lacks the skill-set needed to make a living and slinks back home where he experiences a warm welcome and there is a sweet family reunion and everyone lives happily ever after. A Hallmark moment if ever there was one.

Both of these parables, however, were, when they were first told, about as offensive and shocking as possible.

In the first it was Jesus making the hero of a story someone we might put in the category of an ISIS terrorist or a radical white supremacist. And, in the second, Jesus takes every sacred value about family and belonging and respect and order and tosses them out of the window. He took what had mattered for centuries, what was considered to be the glue that held society together, and treated it as if it mattered not at all.

And, this story we heard today is just as radical, perhaps even more so.

When I was working on my doctorate in theology, I took a seminar called “Exegetical Greek Homiletics.” It was neither as boring nor as difficult as it sounds. There were perhaps a dozen of us taking this seminar. The professor was a New Testament genius from Scotland and assigned me this particular parable, and nothing else, to work on for the entire semester. That’s four and a half months!

When I found out I would be preaching these services today, the first thing I did was look in the lectionary to see what the texts for the day were. When I saw that this parable was among them, I could not help but believe that there is some sort of Divine Entanglement at work here.

This parable is not only found here in Matthew. It is in Luke. It is in Mark and it is in the Gospel of Thomas. We have just over forty parables of Jesus -

depending on how you count. This is only one of two parables that is given a name in the Christian Scriptures. (The other is “The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds.”) To each of them, and only to them, are appended the words, “Let the one who has ears to hear use them.”

If you wanted to find a single teaching of Jesus that was the most comprehensive in conveying what Jesus meant to teach about the rule of God, it would be this parable. Though this is not the parable we are the most familiar with, if you go to the scholarly books and commentaries, you will find that of all of Jesus’ teachings this is the one that gets the most attention. Trust me on this.

I gently remind you that Jesus, the one who told this parable, was not a Christian. He did not live in the United States in the 21st century. He was a Jewish mystic in the Jewish prophetic tradition who was intent on reforming his own religion. It was speaking out of that prophetic tradition that could make him be so irritating.

There are many interpretations of this parable. The one I’m going to offer comes out of my belief that God is not “out there” somewhere but we are in God and, paradoxically, at the same time God is in us, seeking to find expression through who we are and how we live.

The sowing and reaping metaphor is prevalent in both Jewish and Christian teachings. It is also very prominent in Buddhism. It is even part of our conventional wisdom. More than one of you, I’m sure, have heard a parent say, “Be careful what you say or do. What you sow, you will also reap.” In short, what the metaphor means is that everything is connected. Everything has consequences. Everything belongs.

In this parable some seeds produce nothing. Since all of Jesus’ teachings are about what he called “the rule of God,” then the Kingdom of God is a place where there is failure. It is also a place where there is the miraculous as some seeds produce a humongous amount. And, some seeds produce what the farmer would expect.

This is the way farming is. Sometimes you get a crop failure. For whatever reason. Bad weather, insect infestation, something uncontrollable. Sometimes you get an average yield. Sometimes you get what is called a bumper crop. We want there to be a bumper crop every year. Especially in our culture where the emphasis is on success and winning. American success is not synonymous with God’s rule. Hard as that is for many Americans to believe.

What I have come to believe is that this parable is about embracing God's ruling activity under the most unusual and, perhaps, unacceptable forms. Jesus pointed to the fact that in this kingdom prostitutes would be queens, and street people would be kings. Shocking! In God's way of farming, scattering seed indiscriminately, everywhere, in everyone - seeds that fail, seeds that are ordinary, seeds that are spectacular - all are included. Everything belongs.

When I first encountered this parable, I was sure the parable was about the soils mentioned. The admonition was, "Don't be shallow or rocky soil. Be the kind of soil in which God's word can find root and bring forth a bountiful crop. Be religiously and spiritually successful."

But this parable isn't about the different types of soil and our determination and grit to be the right kind of soil. This parable is about the seed and God's indiscriminate way of scattering seed everywhere and taking a chance on us and the world. We are not in control and we are not called to evaluate the nature of the crop. God is to be found in all things, even and most especially in the painful, tragic and sinful things, exactly where we do not want to look for God. In God's reign everything belongs, especially the broken, the poor, the marginalized, the expendable.

It was one thing for Jesus to offer this parable. It was another for him to go off and live it, consorting with the dregs of that society: the outcasts, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors and the like. He scattered seed everywhere. Everything belongs.

I think Jesus taught in parables for several reasons.

For one thing, he could sneak the truth in on people. Most of us don't want to hear the truth directly. We don't want to be reminded, for example, that though we love to call ours a "Christian nation," our social policies are about as anti-Jesus as you can get. He was clear, "As you do it to the least of these, you do it unto me." This parable has to do with a willingness to hear the truth about "what is" and respond to it.

The imprudent generosity of the sower reveals a God who gives without considering the worthiness of the recipient. This apparent lack of taste travels from the sower and permeates the seed, growing in us a word that uproots our deepest assumptions about what is prudent and who is deserving. God's generous giving of self makes the stinginess of our self-protection that much more evident.

As I said, at first this parable seems so inoffensive as to be boring. But, after telling it he went and put it into practice and for that they got him. An encounter

with God and the way God wants things to be, presents a challenge to us about how we see things. Not just once and for all. But every day. A relationship with the God of Jesus is meant to cause us to reorient ourselves - all the time. The rule of God is a rule of truth and this parable is about receiving the truth and staying focused on it in such a way that we are defined by it more than we are defined by anything else.

This parable says that Truth can be lost. I think Truth can most easily be lost by our being sometimes so cocksure that we have found it. Truth can be undervalued or Truth can be received. What we receive from God cannot be satisfied with casual or temporary attention.

This parable is not about what kind of harvest we ourselves produce. The evaluation system of God's way is very different from ours. The emphasis is on our hearing the word.

Our main job in spiritual work is to listen. The failure in this parable is a failure to hear. We are to produce fruit, to be sure. But the success or failure of our efforts is often not in our control. We are to listen. As the parable concludes, "Let anyone who has ears, listen." Gandhi said, "God speaks to us every day, but we do not listen."

The relevance of this parable for the divisive and divided world in which we live is, I think, enormous. Immense.

One of the reasons our world is so divisive and divided is that we can't get it together and keep it together internally. Just so you won't have anything to gripe about, I want to be clear that I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the person sitting next to you.

We have, humans have, such difficulty seeing and taking personal responsibility for own complicity in things being the way they are - both in our personal relationships and in the world.

If you look back through history or around you now, most of the world's atrocities have been committed by people who are absolutely convinced that not only is their view the right one but, even more, that their God has given them both the agenda and the permission to set the world straight.

When Jesus here and elsewhere admonishes us to open our eyes and to use our ears, he is saying that we don't so much achieve the truth as we awaken to it. The most important truth Jesus had for people was about who they really were. Jesus would look at people and see past what they thought defined them - something like poverty, being an outsider, being physically afflicted in some way

and, then, say to them, “If you see yourself as I see you, if you have faith in that, you will experience the wholeness that you are. Who you are is who you are in God. No more. No less.”

We cannot achieve our true identity in God. What we can do is awaken to it. We can draw upon it. We can grow in appreciating ourselves and others as who we and they truly are. Our identity is who we are in God. No more. No less.

This is something organized religions all over the globe have gotten wrong over and over again. Our true identity has nothing to do with our race or with what religion we practice. Hindus have it, Buddhists have it, so-called “pagans” in Africa have it. They are just as much children of God as we are. Objectively. Theologically. Eternally. Where did they come from? Did some other god create them? Every person’s divine DNA is the same. We deny our true identity if we believe anything else.

The great tragedy of much of organized religion is that in some times and places it has convinced people that there is something they can do to get God to love them more. Or, and much worse, there is something they can do to get God to love them less. Jesus taught that God loves you just the way you are. Those who got this were transformed. Those who get this are transformed.

In his great prophetic vision Isaiah hears, not the voice of God, but the seraphim revealing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Few, I think, see this Sacred Presence everywhere and in everyone. Jesus did. The whole earth is full of God’s glory, but we do not perceive it. It is within our reach but beyond our grasp. The earth is filled with the glory of God. So are we. So is everyone. Not knowledge about God. Not information about God. Not facts about God. Not doctrines about God. But, full of God’s glory. What is critical here is not our knowing it but our awareness of being known by it.

The seeds of this truth are scattered all over the world. Everything belongs.

Those who have ears, let them hear. But, let us not ever think we have heard it all.