

Good Sunday morning from a cloudy hill in Rockport.....

The brief meditation below by Henry David Thoreau speaks of “the tonic of wildness” we all need. The problem is, it seems to me, is that many of us don’t know we need that tonic. We think we need other things – safety, money, power, certainty.... A tonic is “a medicine that invigorates or strengthens; anything invigorating physically, mentally, or morally; quinine water; or in music, the first degree of the scale—the keynote.” What tonic do you need this morning to get you going in the best direction today? I don’t think we can ever go wrong in seeking out that tonic of wildness all around us – especially in these days of on-going pandemic panic and uncertainty. I believe the birds of many varieties coming to feed on the suet blocks in the hangers on our deck have more to offer me in tonic form than all the reading I might do sitting in our living room. I invite you to think of the tonics you can take this coming week to help you through this unsettling time for each of us.... We are all in this together, whether we like one another or not.... So, let’s have some ice cream!

Consider this a reminder about our upcoming “ice cream sandwich social” next Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. in the church parking lot.... with a rain date of Sunday, July 26th. Bring your lawn chair.... Wear your mask (except when you’re eating your ice cream!).... Stay six feet apart from one another.... and we’ll have some ice cream together, in person, but not too close to one another. If you’re up for it, send me an e-mail at susanstst@aol.com to let us know you’ll be there so we will be sure to have enough ice cream sandwiches to go around. And if you’re too far away to join us, buy yourself an ice cream sandwich and enjoy it with us in spirit next Sunday afternoon in Thomaston!

Blessings to all this cloudy Sunday morning of Summer..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning’s scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: [freerangepastor](#) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated’s Facebook page....

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you’re interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

p.p.p.s Thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don’t always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to keep writing

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, July 12, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

Holy One, as we gather for worship this day,
not in our sanctuary, but in each of our homes,
may we still come united in your love.
May we seek wholeness in your Spirit.
May we find peace in your presence.
May we absorb the wisdom found in your stories.
May we come ready and willing to receive you this day.
Amen.

A meditation about nature -- in silent conversation with the parables of Jesus

*We need the tonic of wildness,
to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk,
and hear the booming of the snipe,
to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds
her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground.
At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things,
we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be
infinitely wild,
unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because it is unfathomable.
We can never have enough of nature.
We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features,
the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees,
the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets.
We need to witness our own limits transgressed,
and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.*
🌲 Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But

when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen! Matthew
13:1-9

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the and understand it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. Matt
hew 13:18-23

A sermon based on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
“Why do you speak to them in parables?”

Will you pray with me. Challenging God, you call us to consider the teaching of Jesus in parables this day. This teaching is a conundrum to us much of the time. Help us be open to the mystery of the parables, eager for their instruction, and yet not tempted to pin them down in our desire for right answers to your challenging questions. Amen.

What are the most distinctive aspects of Jesus’ life and teaching? If we were “live” today and in our sanctuary together, I would ask you for your responses to that question. But since we can’t be together, I’ll give you my responses. My first one would be to say something about Jesus’ preaching and demonstration of “radical love” – that love that knows no boundaries, that refuses to respond in violent or destructive ways, no matter the provocation, and that is open to all – no matter our station in life, our sex, our wealth, or our religiosity.

My second response to what is most distinctive about Jesus’ life would be to talk about his profound and brilliant use of parables in his teaching and preaching. Brian McLaren, a well known pastor, author and speaker, has written “Parables are to Jesus what jokes are to a comedian.”^[1]

When I first read that comment from McLaren, I thought it rather frivolous and demeaning. But after considering it more deeply, I realized it's true on several levels – good comedians often give us the most vivid and meaningful understandings of life, as Jesus did. Good comedians tell good jokes that make us laugh – at ourselves, at the world, at life. Without good jokes, a comedian isn't funny. Without parables, Jesus might have been just another boring preacher!

A parable, according to my *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, is “a short story based on common experience that contains a meaning,” and that parables are “the stories told by Jesus through the Gospels as a way of teaching which conveys meaning, particularly about the major subject of the reign, or “kingdom,” of God.”^[2]

I prefer another definition I found which says a parable is “a putting together of one thing alongside another by way of comparison or illustration. Jesus uses parables not only to teach, but to manage, and in some cases, inflame conflict.”^[3]

I chose as my sermon title today, a question from the verse in Matthew following the first telling of the parable of the sower, “Then the disciples came and asked [Jesus,] ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ (Matthew 13:10) That, to me, is one of the more intriguing questions in the Gospels. Jesus goes on to give a rather convoluted answer in verses eleven through seventeen. Again, if we were together in person, I'd ask you what you think the reason was that Jesus spoke to his followers in parables.

Jerome, a 4th century bishop of the early church, gave this understanding of the purpose of Jesus' parables, “The crowd is not of a single mentality, for each person has a different frame of mind. [Jesus] therefore speaks to [the people] in many parables so they may receive different teachings depending on their frame of mind.”^[4]

Shortly after I began seminary in 1995, when I was first reading the parables of Jesus, I didn't like them at all. I couldn't appreciate or accept the idea that each parable had a “bottom line,” a meaning that would be clear to all, once we “got it.” I was pleased to learn that early church father Jerome didn't consider Jesus' parables in that way either. Jesus spoke in parables so his hearers, “not of a single mentality,” might “receive different teachings depending on their frame of mind.” And isn't that the most inclusive way to think about Jesus' teaching in parables? Each one of us absorbs stories in different ways so we often find meanings in different ways.

McLaren tells us there are several fascinating commonalities of Jesus' parables in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew. First, McLaren says, "each parable ends with a repeated phrase, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.' That phrase is almost a parable in and of itself. What could Jesus mean by it? Don't just listen with your ears, listen with your heart. Don't just hear my words. Hear my deeper meaning. Don't listen for the literal meaning accessible to your rational mind; seek deeper for a meaning that requires that you make a personal investment of your sincere effort and your imagination.

Second, each parable involves a hiddenness that eventually becomes visible. In Matthew 13, we are presented with one image after another of this hidden-to-visible pattern. This week we have generic seeds planted in a generic field – seeds in which are hidden the potential of a mature plant and eventually a harvest of thousands more seeds, seeds that are hidden in soil where their germination and growth are mysterious and concealed until they sprout and mature....

Third, each parable involves surprise – a surprising variety of harvests, a surprising infestation with weeds [which we'll hear about next Sunday], a surprising size of the full grown mustard seed plant [which we might hear about the following Sunday], and so on.

[McLaren suggests] even without reflection on each parable for the unique and specific insights it yields, perhaps we can begin to get some idea of how parables work. They hide the truth so that we need to do more than simply 'hear with our ears' or 'read with our eyes' on a literal level; we have to invest ourselves in an imaginative search for meaning – a meaning that will surprise us when we discover (that's dis-cover or unhide) it for ourselves....

[McLaren gives this answer to the disciples' question, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'] Because Jesus' message wasn't merely aimed at conveying information. It sought to precipitate something more important: the spiritual transformation of the hearers. The form of a parable helps to shape a heart that is willing to enter an ongoing, interactive, persistent relationship of trust in the teacher. It beckons the hearer to explore new territory. It helps form a heart that is humble enough to admit it doesn't already understand and is thirsty enough to ask questions. In other words [McLaren suggests], a parable renders its hearers not as experts, not as know-it-alls, not as scholars.... but as children....

[McLaren ends his chapter on the parables of Jesus with these thoughts]: Maybe the message of the kingdom of God comes, not as a simple

formula or list of information and not as an angry threat or ultimatum, but as a secret hidden in a parable, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a seed hidden in soil, like yeast hidden in dough.

Human kingdoms advance by force and violence with falling bombs, and flying bullets, but God's kingdom advances by stories, fictions, tales that are easily ignored and easily misunderstood. Perhaps that's the only way it can be."^[5]

The parables of Jesus reveal more than the eye can see and the ear can hear. They reveal our fears and our failures. They reveal our joys and our successes. They reveal our humanity. They reveal the God without and the God within each of us. Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism.... and all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared and niece Pam, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali, Michael and Gail in southern Maine.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction *

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts
of those who make the journey with us.
So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.
And may the Creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all, and
the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of French philosopher, Henri Auriel)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, July 19, 2020

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24;

Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Words to ponder about parables today

“Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message.” ~ Malcolm Muggeridge

“Jesus was short on sermons, long on conversations; short on answers, long on questions; short on abstractions and propositions, long on stories and parables; short on telling you what to think, long on challenging you to think for yourself.” ~ Brian McLaren

“The teachings of Jesus begin in story and end in symbol – they begin in parable and end in us. These are not Bible stories that we learn; these are our stories.” ~ Leonard Sweet

^[1]Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 2006, p. 43.

^[2]Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 1996, p. 200.

^[3]*The Discipleship Study Bible*, 2008, p. 1719.

^[4]Quoted in *The Ancient Christian Devotional*, Thomas C. Oden, General Editor.

^[5]McLaren, *ibid*, p. 44-49, various.