

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

I've been thinking about testaments. There are all kinds – the New Testament and the Old Testament of the Bible.... A person's will is a testament of how they want their affairs and their assets handled after they die. A testament is a testimonial of one's beliefs. A testament is evidence of one's life – how they've lived it, what they've accomplished, what they want remembered about their lives after they're gone from this earthly life.... I wrote yesterday about writing one's own obituary. Several of you responded that you have done that. Maybe before I write my own obituary, it would be good for me to really, seriously, think about my testament of what I believe, why I believe it, and how I demonstrate that belief to others and to myself. Think about it, if you choose to.... If someone asked you, "What's your testament to your life?", how would you answer?

Let me answer the question you may be thinking, since I've been focused on "dead" themes these past few days..... No, I'm not ill, as far as I know, and I hope my time on this earth is not coming to an end in the near future! Perhaps it's the news we are receiving daily now about the number of deaths arising from this awful deadly virus that has lead me to ongoing thoughts about the fragility of life in the midst of the starkness of this worldwide pandemic.

Work with me to find the testaments to goodness all around us.... even in the midst of the darkness of our times....

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 26, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**

Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

Opening Prayer

People, come gather round your computer screens!
Take this time to step out of the obstacle course of daily life
and step into the loving embrace of God.
Here, for just a brief time together on line,
we can stop stressing and cease the juggling of having to manage it all.
Here, we can catch our breaths and regain our balance,
even if only for a brief time.
Here the Spirit (*even* in cyberspace!) offers us kindness and care.
Here we are home in the loving family of God.
Let us worship, together in spirit, if not together in body.
Amen.

A Reflection for This Morning....

by Howard Thurman, 1899 – 1981, a Baptist minister
who later became a professor of religion at various colleges.
He wrote many books of devotions and social commentary.
This one is from his *Meditations of the Heart*, 1953.
It appears in *Prayers for the Common Good*, edited by A. Jean Leshner.
I have been drawn to his words in these chaotic times we're living through....



How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
while something deep within hungers and thirsts for
the still moment and the resting lull.
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes,
a fresh sense of order in our living;
a direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion
and bring meaning in our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment – the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: What are we doing with our lives?
What are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?
Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
For what end do we make sacrifices?
Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes
of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind –
a deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered.
Our spirits are refreshed,
and we move back into the traffic of our daily round,
with the peace of the Eternal in our step.
How good it is to center down!

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

[Jesus] put before them another parable: “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 his branches.”

He told them another parable: “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.” //

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of find pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth of teeth.”

Jesus said, “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

A sermon based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“Have you understood all this?”

Will you pray with me. God of parables and promises, you confound us with your reasoning and tease us with your conclusions. Help us consider, yet again, how to appreciate your kingdom of heaven stories. Remind us that acceptance of your existence lies not in *our* stirring of your ingredients, but

in *your* open invitation to us to taste new and old flavors in your pot of kingdom stew. Amen.

Well, this is our third and final Sunday for consideration of Matthew's telling in his thirteenth chapter of the parables of Jesus. I don't know how you all feel, but I have to say I'm glad we'll be focusing on something different come next Sunday. As much as I appreciate the genius of the parables, I'm getting tired after three weeks of trying to make sense of them.

In the text for this morning it's not the parables themselves that call out to me as much as Jesus' question to his disciples upon hearing all the parables, "Have you understood all this?" he asks them. (Matthew 13:51) And they answer, "Yes." (same verse) REALLY?!? Wouldn't it have sounded more realistic if one of them had responded, "Welllll.... not entirely...." meaning they didn't understand them at all!

I still don't understand very much about all there is to know from Jesus' parables, and my guess is if Jesus' disciples were honest, they would admit the same thing. But, I think that's the point - we're not supposed to know, or pin down, all there is to learn from Jesus' parables. They are open-ended, curious stories made up of simple ingredients and meant to keep us *guessing and wondering* about the kingdom of God rather than thinking we can ever be *sure of* what the kingdom of God is all about.

Maybe the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed grown big, but maybe it's like yeast causing bread to rise.

Maybe the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field, but maybe it's like a pearl of great value.

Maybe the kingdom of God is like a giant fish net catching everybody, but maybe it's like a master of a household treasuring both what is old and what is new in his possessions.

But just maybe, we're invited to think of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven as Matthew defines the kingdom of God, as including all these variations.

Maybe we are to cherish and to thrive upon what is new and then becomes full grown and a safe haven for birds, and us, too - like a mustard seed grown into a full blown tree - or a little country church grown into a bigger little country church with lots of branches.

Maybe we are to cherish and to thrive upon what is one ingredient, added to other ingredients to make what brings nourishment - like yeast and flour and all the

rest - sustenance for body and for heart and soul in casseroles baked in the church kitchen, or strawberry pie prepared and baked at home to be served at a church gathering.

Maybe we are to cherish and to thrive upon what we discover, lost among what we thought was old and useless - like hidden treasure - a found letter written from one church member to another a half century ago or an old hymn, maybe a favorite of young Dot Jameson's.

Maybe we are to cherish and thrive upon the search for what is valuable and upon discovering it, giving our lives to it and for it - like a pearl of great value - or a couple dozen masks carefully sown and given out to help those in need of masks in our community.

Maybe we are to cherish and thrive upon the fullness of *God's* net that holds all the world and distinguishes the holy from the unholy - like a fishing net from which the bad are cast out and the good are kept - so *we* don't have to worry about passing judgment on others or on ourselves.

Maybe we are to cherish and thrive upon what the *ancient scriptures* tell us has become part of our very being as people of faith, but also to cherish and to thrive upon what we discover that is *new and fresh and untried* - reading the Psalms and the Gospels with renewed longing *and* finding exciting ideas of faith in the words of modern day prophets and leaders like John Lewis.

Catholic nun and prolific writer, Sister Joan Chittister says, "If there is a temptation in Christian ministry it is probably the temptation to play church, to dabble in religion, to recite the creed without feeling any moral compulsion whatsoever to render it in flesh and blood... Of course, the call to Christian ministry presupposes a long, long journey up a mountain to find God. But the call to ministry also means that we simply cannot build a spiritual life and expect to stay on the top of our pious and antiseptic little mountains."

We read the parables again and again -- having a nice safe time in talking about their possible meanings -- but do they lead us beyond temptation and nice conversation into action? Do they move us from "playing church" into "doing church"? Do they simply surprise us with their twists or do they astound us with their depth?

What's the one common thread in the parables for this morning? My favorite preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes of this question, "The striking thing about all [the images in this passage] is their essential *hiddenness* - the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast hidden in the dough, the treasure hidden in the

field, the pearl hidden among all the other pearls, the net hidden in the depths of the sea. If the kingdom is like these, then it is not something readily apparent to the eye but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface of things waiting there to be discovered and claimed.... If we want to speak of heavenly things, [Jesus seems to say], we may begin by speaking about earthly things, and if we want to describe that which is beyond all words, we may begin with words we know, words such as: *man, woman, field, seed, bird, air, yeast, bread*; words such as *pearl, net, sea, fish, joy*. The kingdom is like these things; the kingdom is found in these things. These are the places to dig for the kingdom of heaven; these are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having.”^[1]

I'll end with another 21st century parable. The kingdom of God is like an operating room. Surgery is not going well. The patient's vital signs are not stable. The drugs are not doing what they should be doing. The surgical team is in a quandary as to how to help this patient survive. Some of the team members haven't eaten for many hours. Then a member of the medical team takes six dollars out of her pocket and says to another team member, not at the surgery field, “Go down to the hospital gift shop and buy as many individually wrapped chocolates as you can and bring them back.” The chocolate bearing team member brings back enough chocolates for everyone in the operating room. They eat chocolates. Suddenly the room shifts, the surgical team's attitudes and spirits lift, the tenor of the surgery moves from ominous to hopeful. Everyone smiles. The kingdom of God is like this.

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 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

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, August 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Words to ponder today

"The important thing is never to stop questioning." ~ Albert Einstein

"Millions saw the apple fall, but Newton was the one who asked why." ~ Bernard M. Baruch

"Good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers." ~ Josef Albers

"It's important to question what you believe so that you can know whether or not you really believe it. In fact, faith is often born out of questions." ~ Daniel Colston

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.