

Neither Decently Nor in Order
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
July 27, 2014
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
Text: Matthew 13:31-33

The Christian life is never about only the present. It always, always anticipates what God is doing next and invites us to meet God then and there.

This morning in the Adult Christian Education class we looked back over some of the “essential tenets” of our Reformed tradition. None of them is static. The idea of predestination calls us to respond to a God who has predestined us to live into our divine adoption through Christ Jesus. The idea of the sovereignty of God assures us God is sovereign over all that has – and ever will - happen. The tenet of sanctification calls us to make our lives ever-more holy in response to our justification in Christ, and so on. Each of these marks of our faith is forward looking and forward moving.

Now I realize that even mention of words such as predestination and sanctification may cause the eyes to roll back in some of your heads. But long before Luther, Calvin, Knox and other Reformers gave us these principles, Jesus taught his followers to look ahead. Not to ignore the present, mind you. But to know there is always more in store, things we do not and cannot currently see.

One of Jesus’ favorite things to do was to tell parables. A simple definition of that word “parable” is a “parallel story.” When we hear the word parable we think about an image, a metaphor or a story that tells a truth in a different way.

But we should never forget that parables always look forward. In fact, the first definition of the Greek word *parabolō* is “to throw to a point where an entity is positioned.” Forward looking, forward aiming, forward moving. The more familiar definition of that word “parable” as “to make a comparison” is in fact the third definition in the most widely used dictionary of first - century Greek. I know that’s being a word geek, but it’s worth noting.

One of the texts given to us for preaching and hearing this Sunday is a great example of how parables look ahead. Jesus tells more than a few parables in the Gospel of Matthew. Taken together, they give us a deep and broad sense of what Jesus meant. But sometimes it’s best to take them two or three at a time, as Jesus would sometimes make the same point in two or three different ways.

So it is in chapter 13 of Matthew. There Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven, that place that is both out there and beyond but also here and now, a new world order begun in Christ and still unfolding. Our own Linda Matney compiled and edited a lovely book of essays in which a range of people imagine heaven as, she says, our “final destination.”¹ It is a wonderful anthology for any time we need to escape this world temporarily and think about what lies ahead for us in God’s everlasting care.

Until we are called there, however, we are called to be engaged here, as those Jesus summons to advance the work he began, to build the kingdom, to turn this broken world more into a place that fits God’s will and purposes.

So, what is that kingdom like? Well, that kingdom, Jesus said, can be described as a seed from a bush that no one in their right minds would intend to have in their yard. That kingdom is also like a small piece of left-over, spoiled bread that was, back in the day, considered by many to be unclean and dangerous

Yes, you heard that correctly. The kingdom of heaven is like a seed from mustard bush, a weed that invades and takes over. The kingdom of heaven is like a bit of leaven that can be used for good but, if mishandled, can turn your stomach inside out. Hey, Jesus said it. Not me.

That’s the thing about parables, isn’t it? They often raise more questions than they answer. They provoke the imagination and evoke a new way of thinking. If you’re looking for just a piece of drive-by, bumper-sticker Biblical wisdom, something like the Book of Proverbs is your best bet. Parables, on the other hand, can be real head-scratchers, as in the two we look at today.

Let’s briefly take them one at a time. Matthew writes:

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 its branches.’

On its face, this seems like a reasonable comparison. But context is everything. In antiquity, no one really wanted to have a mustard bush around. They tended to take over whatever garden space they could grab. But Jesus seemed to be making a more subtle point. This parable is not about what we might value. It is about the unexpected

¹ Imagining Heaven: An Anthology of Personal Visions of Heaven

and seemingly unstoppable growth of something small, a single mustard seed. Given a chance it grows to provide shelter for God's creatures.

Then Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a small amount of leaven, which a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour. Once leavened and baked, this would make enough bread for a feast. Again, context is everything. Jesus wasn't talking about the kind of packaged yeast modern-day bakers might pull off the shelf.

He was talking about leaven that was created by setting aside a portion of bread to spoil. It wasn't a pretty sight. Today the health department would downgrade a kitchen that left spoiled bread lying around. But, if just a pinch was taken and used at just the right time, the leaven was an agent that would expand and enlarge a mound of flour into something warm, wonderful and life-giving.

A mustard seed and a pinch of leaven. Both things that would be cast aside, thrown out most days. Neither favored nor desirable. But both bearing the power to transform where they were planted and what they touched, albeit in ways the status quo might not want or expect.

What was Jesus saying to his followers? How was he suggesting they view the world around them? How might we take in this parable to see the world around us in new and unexpected ways, ways that might reach deep inside us and change our outlook on everything in life?

What was Jesus saying had value, things otherwise overlooked and discarded? What unlikely agents of transformation might God be drawing our attention to see? What and whom have others cast aside that might yet be signs of the kingdom of God?

Perhaps today, it is the LGBT youth who are thrown out of their homes and rejected at school, judged and misunderstood, labeled and demonized, who end up in foster homes or, worse, on the streets. Maybe they are signs and agents of the kingdom of God.

Maybe it is today's mentally ill, who lack the shelter and treatment they need ... so they, too, end up on the streets or wandering from homeless shelter to homeless shelter in town after town. Maybe they are signs and agents of the kingdom.

Or maybe it is the immigrants around us. Perhaps, most poignantly, the kingdom God has in mind values the tens of thousands of unaccompanied immigrant children streaming over the southwestern and western borders of the U.S., simply seeking sanctuary, literally running for their lives because their homes have become unsafe.

Perhaps in them God can transform the world, can transform us.

This morning's Observer celebrates a new \$45 million raised among the city's affluent to support the arts in our city. They are to be congratulated. But I can't help but wonder whether symphonies and art museums are like the mustard seeds and leaven Jesus had in mind for the kingdom.

There is great irony in all of this for us Presbyterians. We do so like to try to do everything decently and in order. But we live in an increasingly fluid and often chaotic world.

The consultant and coach the Charlotte Presbytery has hired to help us navigate its future tells us we live in a VUCA world – a world marked by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. Today, bottom-up organizational thinking is just as valuable, if not more, than top-down. Plans must be organic and flexible rather than imposed and static. All of that is today's reality.

So, the world around us frequently smirks and shrugs at our Presbyterian notion that we can do everything decently and in order. O, there are still plenty of opportunities to serve Christ that can transform us and the world. But today they just may not fit that old Presbyterian penchant for things that can be planned and predicted. Maybe we Presbyterians ought to spend a lot more time with these two parables.

Here at Caldwell, we "get" a lot of this. We try to be flexible and organic. We try to be a liquid church. We all know those deadly six words that have choked the life of many churches, "We've never done it that way." We take that as an invitation – if not a challenge - to go ahead and try the next new thing.

But God giggles at us, sometimes, too. For instance, we dedicated last year to thinking about our future. How we tried to be so intentional and organized about it. We designed a process we called "3D – Discernment, Discussion and Dreaming." We studied and we discussed. And boy did we dream. We invited everyone into the conversation and about 150 of you weighed in with great ideas and questions and possibilities for new life here. And we adopted several ideas immediately.

But our biggest ideas were our boldest. We put a lot of time into those. We've looked at opening our own bilingual preschool, our own after-school program or an outreach ministry to Central Piedmont Community College. We considered deep ministry with at-risk, pregnant teenage mothers. We've thought about how God might use the gifts of entrepreneurship and even micro-finance to help people help themselves.

Teams of members talked to other experts around the city. They explored various partnerships. But all of that might just have been too orderly for our mysterious God. None of those ideas has panned out, at least not yet. They might still. Meantime, we wait and we watch.

Maybe, with today's parables in mind, we need new eyes. Maybe we need to look for possibilities where we least expect to find them. Maybe we need to look even harder at how we might serve those our city casts aside, those others consider less than desirable, even worthless, like a troublesome mustard bush or the leaven that dwells inside a piece of spoiled bread.

One of the most important ideas you offered is moving forward in concrete forms, and I am so glad for that. Many of you said you want to deepen our conversation and shared understanding of race and class, to move beyond being a diverse but polite group of friends to those kinds of discussions that lead to real mutual understanding, respect and empathy.

We are calling that initiative Discipleship of Race and Class, keeping in mind that the meaning of the word "disciple" is "one who learns." We all have a lot to learn about the complexities and realities that come with our differences in race and class. Like leaven, this dialogue may be a little dangerous. It will liven things up. It will also widen our understanding. An important step in that initiative will be our worship on August 10 with De and Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick, men of different races but the same last name, whose families are connected through the sin of slavery.

There is another new possibility that is in keeping with many of your ideas from the 3D process. It has to do with mentoring at-risk, inner-city youth and building relationships with their families, all with the goal of those kids graduating from high school and pursuing the next level of education. Stay tuned to hear more about that soon.

In closing, one last vital point.

Lest we should limit the idea of the kingdom of heaven to being only about others, let us be reminded that the realm of God's mysterious, transformational ways reaches both ways. It doesn't just reach out beyond us. That realm, those ways reach inside us, as well, which is just as important. When we glimpse the kingdom, when we find our place in it, when we find our calling and purpose in the kingdom, we are changed and transformed ... one by one. That is how the world is changed. That is how God's kingdom takes over.

So, friends, may our God open our eyes to see – both inwardly and outwardly – what we might overlook, that we might be transformed by the agents of God, whatever they are and wherever they are. Most of all, may God prevent in us the sin of indifference. Amen.