

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church by Mrs. Jane Chick

July 30, 2017, 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Text: Romans 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

“God’s kingdom is like a pine nut that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree, and eagles build nests in it. Or God’s kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it. Or, God’s kingdom is like a fishnet cast into the sea, catching all kinds of fish. When it is full, it is hauled onto the beach. The good fish are picked out and put in a tub; those unfit to eat are thrown away. That’s how it will be when the curtain comes down on history. The angels will come and cull the bad fish and throw them in the garbage. There will be a lot of desperate complaining but it won’t do any good.

Jesus asked, “Are you starting to get a handle on all this? They answered, “Yes”.

This is how a portion of today’s Gospel is interpreted in THE MESSAGE, a reading Bible as the translator Eugene Peterson puts it. Peterson’s intention is to make the Bible ‘readable’ – to read it as a story, and thus make it more accessible and relatable to our lives today.

As I was reading this passage I was drawn to a verse that was not included in today’s reading. It is Matthew 13:34 which as read from the Oxford Annotated Bible is “Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables, without a parable he told them nothing.” Peterson’s translation reads, “All Jesus did that day was tell stories – a long storytelling afternoon.” While I sometimes disagree with the way The Message reveals scripture, Jesus as storyteller went to my core.

I come from a large family of storytellers. Every family get together from as far back as I can remember involved hours of storytelling. Stories about growing up in house with 9 children through the depression, and one of my favorites- the love story of my aunt and uncle who were married only 8 weeks when Uncle Paul was shipped over to Europe during World War II. He came home with such a significant brain injury that the doctors told Auntie Ceil she would have no problem getting an annulment, to which her answer was, “The vows were for better or for worse, in sickness and in health.” Uncle Paul and Auntie Ceil would be married until his death, 6 months shy of 50 years. Sorry, but when you are surrounded by storytellers, you can’t help but finish a good story.

Which makes me think that that’s what it must have been like in Jesus’ time. Jesus would be amongst crowds of thousands and begin to tell a story. His audience would be listening with rapt attention – their tradition for passing information, history, family sagas was oral after all – few journals or books, definitely no email, Facebook, or Twitter. I imagine Jesus starting with a story like the mustard seed for the farmers in crowd, then moving to stories about yeast and dough for the women, the pearl of great price for the merchants, the net full of fish for the fishermen. He would tell a story to touch each person in the audience with ‘their own’ story, even the rich and the landed, the tax collectors, Pharisees and Sadducees.

In New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine’s book **short stories by Jesus**, she states, “Jesus knew that the best teaching concerning how to live, and live abundantly comes not from spoon-fed data or an answer sheet. Instead it comes from narratives that remind us of what we already know, but are resistant to recall.” When Jesus was with the many, Jesus wasn’t preaching the Law, chapter and verse as it would have been taught in the Temple. Jesus knew that the best way to make his point was to tell a story the people could relate to. Jesus was all about building relationships through stories. And I believe that is what Jesus is looking for us to do today.

Consider how we react to the news, events, and problems of the day. We might feel bad when we see statistics about the millions living in poverty or who are in danger because they are in the middle of a war

zone. We react and look to do something when we see the pictures of injured or poisoned children, or when we read the individual story of someone like Malala Yousafzai, a young girl shot by the Taliban because she wanted all girls to be able to receive an education.

Or consider this story – about 6 years ago, I was having a conversation with someone about ‘all the illegal immigrants – how they should all be rounded up and sent back to where they came from because they were stealing our jobs and using up all our money through food stamps and welfare.

I proceeded to tell the story of a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student whose parents were undocumented from Guatemala, though Chris was born here in the United States. They lived simply – no TV, no computer, very few clothes – in a very small apartment. Dad worked at a local business and got there by bus or by bike; they had no car. Chris’s father was his world; Chris and Dad would play soccer in a nearby park and then get ice cream. Chris would light up when he mentioned his dad. One day he came in to school and said men had come to his home and taken his father away in handcuffs. The father was taken to Hartford and flown back to Guatemala. Chris and his mom had to move to Tennessee to live with his mom’s sister. As far as I know he has not seen his father since that night. My sharing that story humanized the plight of the undocumented in this country and gave that person something to seriously consider. I believe my story made a difference.

And just as Jesus’ stories still have impact on us over 1900 years later, I think Jesus wants us to use our stories, our parables, to impact those around us today. As Professor Levine states in her introduction to short stories, “the parables more often tease us into recognizing what we’ve already always known and they do so by reframing our vision. The point is less that they reveal something new that that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often very unsettling.”

So just as Jesus, the storyteller related to his audience by incorporating those things familiar to them, we too must tell our stories as they relate to those around us. We must be bold enough and courageous enough to share our parables, even if it takes us out of our comfort zone. Just as Jesus knew the power of a good story, he also knew that in order for a story to be effective the audience had to be listening. More than once, Jesus said, “Let anyone with ears, listen!” or he would ask the question, “Do you understand?” So storytelling becomes a two-way communication. Teller and Listener.

We need to understand the part of audience participation – listening. The audience – we – need to become active listeners. I don’t mean acting out the story as you hear it. I mean being fully engaged with the person telling the story - a nod of the head, a smile when fitting, gentle eye contact. It also means not anticipating the ending, putting your own ending to the story, drawing conclusions, either silently or out loud. This is a crucial listening skill that I will honestly say I have not come close to mastering, but that does not mean I haven’t kept trying.

It’s a skill we need to practice every day and not just with those around us. It’s a skill we need to practice with God as well. God speaks to us all the time – in the quiet, meditative moments, during a walk on the beach, or sitting in the car in traffic. God gave us ears to hear and voices to tell our stories. Jesus gave us parables, his stories to guide us. The Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

May we faithfully use these gifts to spread God’s good news through our stories, our parables wherever we may be. Let us pray from an Amish prayer book Simple Prayers of Love & Delight:

Beautiful Words  
And useful too;  
Words of Godliness  
Words that are true.                      Amen