

“Life as a Parable”  
Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-52  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
July 30, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

Sometimes I don't much like life as a parable.

No, I like the trains to run on time, my flight to arrive as scheduled, the waitress to serve what I ordered. I like predictability and reason.

“Be Thou My Vision” is one of our hymns this morning/songs this morning. It is a beloved musical piece. According to our *Glory to God* hymnal, it's a modern poetic version of a 10<sup>th</sup> century Irish monastic prayer, set to an Irish folk melody.

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart*

*Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art*

Think about that claim: God as our all-encompassing vision. God as our best thought and our light. God as our wisdom and truth. God as our shelter. God as our power and ruler. God as the heart of our own heart. God as our all in all.

That's right. These beautiful words get at the heart of the matter, that God is the fullness of joy of life's meaning, the totality of truth and goodness.

Sometimes it's exactly *that* which rubs me the wrong way when I look at it from a worldly perspective: God as fullness, as total, God as our complete vision, with nothing else anywhere in the picture except for the Lord.

As much as we may like this language in worship, it is devoid of meaning if it is not also true in our boardroom and bedroom, in our family life and individual aspirations.

So no, I don't always particularly like life as a parable. I do want God to be my vision, for my hopes and desires to be directed and filtered by the will and ways of the divine. I want Jesus to be the Lord of my heart. But I don't always desire that God be so preeminent that everything else becomes as nothing.

Let me explain. I want God to be my vision, but I also want to live with Anne, to meet her needs and fulfill her desires. I want God to be the Lord of my heart, but I also want not only to live with Anne, but for our children to be healthy and happy. I want God to be my best thought, my light, my wisdom and truth, but I also want to live with Anne, for our children to be healthy and happy, and to continue to discover fulfillment in my vocation as pastor.

The problem is this: the list goes on and on. I want God to be the heart of my own heart, but I also want a solid 403(b) and a good pension. I want travel. I want good health. I want nice neighbors. I want the Rays to beat the Yankees and win the AL East.

After all, those seem to be normal desires, right? It all seems ordinary and reasonable. Until we consider life as a parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. It's tiny. I mean, truly tiny. And if God's kingdom - of light and life and power and deliverance, with angels singing and Jesus triumphant - begins like a little mustard seed, that blows up all our assumptions.

Instead, it means we have to keep a sharp eye out. We have to look carefully for the presence of God and life's true meaning just below the surface, just below the level of appearance.

Looking with God's eyes isn't easy or simple. Just a couple of weeks ago, as I've shared, we went back to Indianapolis to place Anne's mother's ashes in the memorial garden there. Everything was over. We were on our way back to the airport around noon. I stopped at a convenience store to fill up the rental car. A drunk fellow started hassling Rachel as she made her way from the convenience store bathroom back out to the car. I told Rachel to shut the door as he was standing in the open doorway speaking to her.

I didn't want to see him with God's eyes. I wanted him out of the way. I wanted Rachel back safely in the car. I wanted us to make our flights on time. I didn't want to make the effort to look more closely. I may have recognized a brother, a child of God, a person created in God's image.

God wants us to look and listen carefully. The least significant person or the most bothersome individual may have the most important word for us. We have to pull off the wrapper of life, pull up the carpet on all the floors of our experience. We have to look and listen. The signs of God's coming are hard to discern amid the smoke and mirrors of our lives. The sound of God's voice is sometimes a whisper – pitched just at the edge of our hearing.

Parable life is subversive. So says one commentator – and he's right. He notes the weirdness of Jesus talking about mustard and yeast. "Mustard," he says, "is a weed, one that a farmer in Jesus' day would pull up from a field. Yeast, here named as a positive, is something a woman would clean out of her house at the approach of Passover."

So here's a moral: God uses unusual experiences and unexpected people to teach us how to see and hear.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, generated a lot of controversy when he suggested that social media could become to its participants what churches are to Christians. He claims that Facebook can help them discover "a more connected world."

Melanie McDonagh focuses on Mark Zuckerberg's suggestion in a recent article. She reflects his assessment that "people who go to church are more likely to volunteer and give to charity, because they are religious and because they are connected in community." McDonagh goes on to note that churches are ready-made communities and that mental health research demonstrates the salutary benefit of regular church attendance.

It's ironic, isn't it? Our fear of our neighbors, our sometimes disgust with others, our deep desire to separate ourselves from the crazy Democrats or Republicans or fill-in-the-blank-here is what leads us to isolation and loneliness. Our insistence on radical individualism diminishes our vision and degrades our hearing.

Looking and listening with the eyes and ears of faith is hard and risky. But it helps us become who we are, who we are designed to be. It helps us to become healthy.

But still, parable life is hard. Think about the identity challenge of two other parables in this passage: The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. Someone discovers the treasure and goes and sells everything and buys that field. And the kingdom of heaven is like one pearl of exceedingly great value. A merchant, finding that one pearl, goes and sells all she has and buys it.

Yes, it's attractive to find treasure and discover it in that field. But the price of the experience is radical and all-consuming. The one who buys the field has to liquidate everything – stocks, bonds, real estate, 401(k). He even has to get a reverse mortgage on his home, sell off the boat, give up those special vacations in order to buy this one treasure.

Same for the pearl. This individual, who has built her life and reputation as a merchant in the marketplace, now opts to gather every single resource she can leverage to purchase this pearl. She gets the pearl, but her new identity is no longer rooted in her former work in buying and selling, but as the one transformed by the claim of the one pearl.

Encountering the kingdom of mercy and forgiveness and overflowing grace shakes our foundations. God's will and ways demand we define ourselves far differently than we may have previously.

These parables are difficult, because you and I don't generally spent much of our lives with mustard seeds or kneading yeast into flour or finding a treasure in a field or a pearl of great price. Jill Duffield, the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook and our former Faith Focus Weekend speaker, translates them in more accessible ways.

"The kingdom of heaven, God's presence and will, is like an antibiotic, silent and unseen, but active, life-saving and history-altering.

“The kingdom of heaven is like the painting you found in the attic of your grandparents’ home, the one stuck in the middle of boxes and junk. It caught your eye. You dusted it off and took it home to Google the name of the artist and discover it’s worth a mint.

“The kingdom of heaven is like that heart-tugging television show where people search for family members from whom they’ve been long separated. They search for years and years . . . and finally are reunited in tears and joy. Questions and conversations follow, but there is no going back. The family is forever reconfigured and redefined.”

I love her examples. The antibiotic, the Powerball-like painting, the embrace of newly discovered family, all are valued beyond count or measure.

All this demands transformation. All this leads us into newness.

That’s what experiencing God is like. That’s why even though it’s uncomfortable, even though we often don’t like or understand it as first, we love it.

So we sing, early and late. We give, with more and more generosity. We dream of new and different ways to serve and share. We discover joy in moments ordinary and everyday.

That’s it. That is parable life. We sing, early and late. We give, with growing generosity. We dream, of new horizons. We are found by God smack dab in the everyday.

In the midst of our daily routine, may parable life surprise us with spiritual growth and joy, each and every moment.