

Three Tales

January 31, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 13:24-35

So for the last few weeks, we have been exploring Matthew's telling of some of the earliest stories of Jesus' life and ministry. The story of the wise men being unexpectedly filled with joy upon reaching the home of Mary and Joseph and Jesus. The story of John the Baptist preaching repentance, and Jesus redefining what that meant. The story of Jesus being called from his baptism into the wilderness to come face-to-face with his vulnerabilities and temptations – just as you and I are called to do from time to time. And the story of Jesus preaching to the weary and bedraggled crowds – assuring them that no matter what the world told them to the contrary, they were *Makarios* – blessed – children of God most high.

And what we have seen from the very beginning, through all of these stories, is that Jesus has come to essentially blow peoples' minds. To challenge their assumptions. To show them that in God's kingdom things aren't always what they seem. In the kingdom of God, astrologers and fortune tellers and those clearly on the outside of "good Jewish teachings" may be among the first to see and recognize Jesus for who he is. God speaks to, and works through, some of the most unexpected people imaginable. In the kingdom of God we see even Jesus himself – the son of God – opening himself up to be changed and transformed in the moment of his baptism. In the kingdom of God it doesn't matter in the least how high and mighty you are. Everyone – even God's son – struggles with longings and temptations and unfulfilled desires and wilderness seasons. And everyone – even God's son – is shaped by their time in the wilderness. And in the kingdom of God the poor and the destitute and the sick and the hurting and the broken and the downtrodden take their place alongside the healthy and the wealthy and the elite at God's banquet table where status and position mean nothing and love and openness mean everything.

Today we are skipping over quite a bit and landing in Matthew chapter 13, where we see (probably for the first time) Jesus using one of his favorite teaching tools – the parables.

It's interesting – I don't know that I have ever heard the word "parable" used outside of conversations about Jesus and his teachings. But the truth is, parables are something that we use all the time in our world as a way to teach. It's basically a story – usually a very short story – or a visual (like a picture or a video) meant to convey a moral or a truth.

Here's an example of a popular parable – not one by Jesus, but one written probably around the 6th century. And it's one that I referenced at the dinner table just this last week when my kid was inhaling his dinner practically without chewing and then trying to make it into a competition with my other kid. Because...siblings. And then, he'd stop eating and start talking...and talking...and talking...and talking...and forget about the food in front of him and then wonder why we were all waiting on him to finish at the end. Ah...parenting...

So we told him this story, which was met with lots of sighs and eye rolls. But in the end, I think the point was made.

A Hare was making fun of the Tortoise one day for being so slow.

"Do you ever get anywhere?" he asked with a mocking laugh.

"Yes," replied the Tortoise, "and I get there sooner than you think. I'll run you a race and prove it."

The Hare was much amused at the idea of running a race with the Tortoise, but for the fun of the thing he agreed. So the Fox, who had consented to act as judge, marked the distance and started the runners off.

The Hare was soon far out of sight, and to make the Tortoise feel very deeply how ridiculous it was for him to try a race with a Hare, he lay down beside the course to take a nap until the Tortoise should catch up.

The Tortoise meanwhile kept going slowly but steadily, and, after a time, passed the place where the Hare was sleeping. But the Hare slept on very peacefully; and when at last he did wake up, the Tortoise was near the goal. The Hare now ran his swiftest, but he could not overtake the Tortoise in time.

I remember once when I was a teenager and my dad told me a parable. I don't remember exactly the circumstances, but I think I must have been waiting around for God to take care of some problem that I was facing, and I was basically just sitting around on my duff and not doing anything about it.

"There was once a man," my dad told me, "who lived in a big house near a lake."

One day, it started raining, and raining, and raining. It rained so much and so hard that the lake waters began to rise and the house began to flood. "You need to get out of there!" the emergency responders told him. "Come on, climb in the fire truck, and we will take you to safety!" But the man said, "no worries – God will protect me."

Pretty soon, the man had to go upstairs in the house, the waters were rising so much. And as he looked out the second story window all he could see was water.

And he saw a man in a canoe. "Come on, dude! You are in danger! Climb in the boat and I will row you to safety!"

"That's okay," said the man. "I have faith. God will save me."

As the water continued to rise, the man was forced to climb up to the roof of his house. There was a helicopter flying around, looking for stranded victims. "Hang on, we are coming to get you!" the responders yelled. "Nope, God will save me! I know he will!" the man insisted.

Well, the man drowned. And when he went to heaven and met God, he was a little bit miffed. "What's with this, God? I had faith that you would come save me and you didn't! I died! What gives?"

And God said "I sent you a fire truck, a boat, and a helicopter and you refused every one of them. What did you expect would happen?"

Throughout scripture we find parables all over the place. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments the people lived primarily in an oral culture, where storytelling and the passing down of stories from one generation to the next, was critically important. Stories are much easier to remember and tell than long theological treatises, and a lot easier to understand and apply. And Jesus made full use of this teaching tool.

In Matthew chapter 13 alone, there are *seven* different parables. *Seven*. That's a *ton*. We read three of them today, but that was less than half of them Jesus tells one story, after another, after another. And he gets more and more excited, the longer he talks. He tells the parable of the sower, sowing his seeds, and the seed falls on different kinds of ground. And he spells out for the listeners exactly what the seeds mean, and what the rocky ground means, and what the weeds mean, and what the good soil means. So that there is absolutely no question. The seed will only grow if it is planted in good soil. So what can we do to cultivate good soil in ourselves? To make us ready to receive the seed of God's word?

And then, Jesus tells the parable of the weeds growing among the wheat. "The farmer doesn't go out and just pour herbicide over the whole crop without thinking," Jesus says, "because it will kill the wheat too." Sometimes the weeds and the wheat have to grow together, and when it is time for the harvest the farmer will sort everything out.

And then, Jesus continues. Tiny mustard seed grows into a really big tree. Itty bitty granules of yeast leaven the whole loaf.

And it's at this point that the disciples start to hold up their hands and call a time-out. Um...Jesus...can we go back to that story about the weeds and the wheat? You blew right past it and never told us what that story meant! So he explains that parable, and

then without taking even so much as a breath he follows that parable up with three more. “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. Like a merchant in search of fine pearls. Like a net that was thrown into the sea.

And yet, the disciples are still scratching their heads. “We think we understand. But there is just so much to think about.”

And it’s true. There is. Reading Matthew 13 is kind-of like reading all of Aesop’s Fables in one sitting. Fun, maybe...entertaining...engaging...but after awhile all of the stories start to blend together and the morals get confused with one another and you just can’t take in much more. That’s about where the disciples were.

But the truth is, at least for the three parables that we read today, one really does lead in to the next, which leads in to the next, all together telling one big story of hope.

When we read the parable of the weeds and the wheat, we usually tend to think of it as being about certain people who are weeds, and certain people who are good crops. The moral of the story being, don’t be a weed. But is it not true that you and I, each and every one of us, has both weeds and wheat growing within our own lives, our own souls, each and every day? We are people who have an amazing capacity for love, and grace, and compassion. And at the same time, we are also plagued by selfishness and laziness and misdirected anger. We long to do good; to love well; to act faithfully; to model strength and wisdom. But then, in the words of the Apostle Paul “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” We get in our own way. It’s almost like the old cartoons of the angel sitting on one shoulder and the devil on the other, constantly duking it out as we argue relentlessly with ourselves.

Weeds and wheat, coexisting in the same field. In the same body. In the same soul. “In the end,” Jesus tells us, “I will take care of all of that. Right now, they have to grow side-by-side because if you root out one you may do damage to the other. But in the end, I will take everything that is bad, that is toxic, that is unhealthy, and root it all out and destroy it. And all that will be left will be a strong and plentiful harvest.”

But then that begs the question: What if the harvest is *not* strong and plentiful? What if the weeds are like the ones in my garden at home and they just grow up and take over? What if there isn’t enough good there to withstand the bad?

That’s when Jesus jumps into the next two parables – the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast.

“It doesn’t take much,” Jesus is saying. The smallest of all seeds can become the greatest of all trees. The tiniest little bit of yeast will totally change the makeup of the dough. The tiniest, most miniscule little bit of faith; the smallest, most insignificant act

of love; the passing smile or the quick text or the single act of kindness or the hasty prayer – these little seeds; these minute granules of yeast – they are surprisingly strong, and powerful, and if given the chance they will grow. They will rise. They will bring forth life and beauty and nourishment and shelter. They will protect us from the weeds that intrude.

“So when you feel like your faith is wearing thin; your patience is waning; you are about at the end of your rope, take heart,” Jesus is telling us. “That little mustard seed of faith hiding out deep within you; that little yeast granule of love buried deep down – I am going to use those to begin the work of restoring you. And just you wait. In the end, your harvest will be plentiful.”

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus is telling us, is a place of hope and of healing. A place where we will be set free of all of the weeds – the chains – the sins – that bind us so tightly. A place where anger and fear and pain and suffering will no longer be welcome. A place where we will no longer cause harm to one another, either intentionally or unintentionally. Where we will no longer try to one-up one another or put one another down. A place where power and prestige don't matter one iota; where independence and self-sufficiency take a backseat to care and compassion.

The kingdom of heaven is a place where everything that kills and destroys gets pulled up and thrown away, and where everything that grows and leavens is brought to fulfillment. Where sins are overcome and grace abounds. Where hatred wastes away and love blossoms.

“My friends,” Jesus asks us, “are you ready to be a part of a kingdom like this?”