First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

7/30/23

Disruption

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

**The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

**31**He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; **32**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.”

**The Parable of the Yeast**

**33**He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

**Three Parables**

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

**45**“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; **46**on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

**47**“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; **48**when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.” **49**So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous **50**and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

**Treasures New and Old**

**51**“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” **52**And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Back in the 18th Century, a text like today’s passage would have sparked a sermon of one hour, or more, depending on how the Spirit moved. You heard me right, the sermon would go for at least an hour, just the sermon. And, if, by chance, you happened to fall asleep during one of these marathon expositions of the word, the Deacons had long poles that they’d use to hit you on the shoulder to wake you up. And no, Deacons, you will not be getting long poles anytime soon, sorry.

Now let me say a couple of things about long drawn out sermons: First, I’m very grateful that hour plus long sermons are a thing of the past, because I simply don’t think I could preach that long (and I’m pretty sure y’all wouldn’t want me to do that either), and second, I don’t like listening to lengthy sermons because I believe there’s a fine line between a sermon and a hostage situation.

So, when I look at passages, like the one that we’ve heard today; one that on the surface seems to be all over the map, I try really hard to resist the temptation to address each and every single point, or issue, the writer may raise. My goal is to find a phrase, a verse, and idea, or even a word or two, and go from there.

Many preachers, (at least those who don’t want to preach an hour or more), will just focus on the parable of the mustard seed, at the beginning of this reading, and put aside the rest of the passage. Focusing on how God grows great things from the smallest of seeds is definitely an appropriate place to focus our attention, but I wonder if there might be another perspective that we’ve overlooked.

In looking at today’s Gospel reading; one that I’ve worked with quite a few times, in my preaching career, I wanted to see if I could figure out why these five parables are grouped together. It took a bit of digging on my part, but the thru-line I found is a reference to things hidden; the treasure hidden in the field, the yeast hidden in the dough, that one fine pearl hidden amongst ordinary pearls, the tasty fish hidden in a large catch.

Mustard seeds are also hidden, and if you’ve ever seen a mustard seed, you’ll notice that it’s tiny, almost invisible. In Jesus’ day, mustard plants were considered weeds, something noxious and invasive, and not something that a farmer would deliberately plant. That said, because of the size of the mustard seed, they weren’t noticeable in a larger bag of seeds and be inadvertently planted with the good grain. They’d spring up and disrupt the farmer’s plans, because the farmer would have to take time to make sure that the weeds didn’t crowd out the grain. I’m sure you gardeners understand what I’m saying.

The connection between the parable of the mustard seed, and the other parables we’ve heard about today, is the idea that hidden things can, and often do, disrupt the normal everyday flow of life.

Theodore J. Wardlaw, a former president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, writes, *“Mustard seeds, lying undetected in a big sack of some other kind of seed, are finally thrown onto the waiting soil in the same handful as that other, more dominant seed; no one suspects for an instant that any plant other than the one that is planted will sprout and grow up. A mustard tree is not what is expected, but nobody notices the seed. It’s hard to see, hard to keep an eye on, but has a way of mixing with what is more noticeable. At the end of the day, as it germinates and sprouts and grows, its final result radically reorients what is expected.”*

Is it possible, then, that all of these parables, but particularly the parable of the mustard seed, point to something invasive, unexpected and unpredictable about the Kingdom of God?

That phrase, *radically reorients what is expected,* really resonates with me, because that’s what happens when we live out the gospel message. Our lives become radically reoriented towards Kingdom work and away from those thoughts, words and deeds that separate us from God. Our everyday, normal existence is disrupted and forever changed. At least that’s what’s supposed to happen.

Too often, though, we struggle with the unexpected and unpredictable. Too often, the church prefers to live in “we’ve always done it that way,” mode instead of being open to new ideas, or different ideas, or hearing a different perspective. We get comfortable with the way things are. We insist that nothing change. We stop being interested in growing and expanding our understanding of God and God’s message and in doing so, we make idols out of tradition.

Too often, when we are presented with a new way of seeing and hearing the radical message of the gospel, we recoil and treat those new thoughts and new ideas as noxious weeds which must be cut down, rooted out and destroyed.

And just as often, those who advocate for new ways of understanding God’s word or fresh perspectives of the gospel message, are branded heretics and expelled from the community of faith, or even worse. And that’s exactly what happened to Jesus. Remember, Jesus didn’t come to establish a new religion. He didn’t wake up one morning and think, “Huh, I think today’s the day that I’ll start a new church and we’ll call it Christianity.” That was never the goal.

Just as yeast disrupts bread dough bringing it to life, and transforming it into something new, those new perspectives on the gospel message give us the opportunity to transform ourselves into something new and better, if we’re willing to get out of our comfort zones and allow our old ways of thinking to be disrupted.

Those tiny ideas, that are no bigger than a mustard seed, can sprout and grow into the greatest of shrubs, providing shelter for many who otherwise would be left without a place to call home. And we’ve seen that happen time and time again over the course of the existence of the Christian church. We’ve seen it in the reexamination of the role of women in the life and ministry of the church, and in how we understand the evils of slavery, to name just a couple of examples. There are plenty more examples of tiny ideas radically changing and disrupting the Church for the better, if we’re willing to look for them.

So, what traditions have we made idols of? What new ideas have we seen as noxious weeds, to be rooted out and destroyed? How long will we allow “we’ve always done it that way,” to prevent us from fully living into the message that our Savior taught us? And how long will we continue to attempt to build a Kingdom that only celebrates the past? Siblings in Christ, we must be open to having our comfortable faith disrupted by new thoughts, and new perspectives, otherwise why are we here?

I love the motto of the United Church of Christ, which is “God is Still Speaking.” And my question to you is this, are we willing to listen to the promptings of God, through the voice of the Holy Spirit, when those tiny ideas start sprouting, or not?

AMEN