

Understanding all?

Scandalous God, sowing weeds among the crop, raising bread with impure yeast, offering treasure beyond price, casting a net that catches good and bad: throw down our mean idols of purity and possession and let the Son of man show us your inclusive, provocative, wide-branching love; through Jesus Christ, the stumbling block.

A Collect for Proper 12A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-13; Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus put before the crowds 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."

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

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

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

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

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Whenever I encounter this reading from Matthew's gospel I am struck by the humor of one line in it.

After Jesus pelts his listeners with parables – each one of which is utterly confounding – he asks: "Have you understood all this?" –

which is crazy enough – but then, they answer: “Yes.”

And maybe this is one of the main takeaways from this experience of Jesus and those who traveled with him then and in our own traveling with him now.

We want to understand. We want to get things sorted out in our minds. We want mastery of the subject.

Often I speak of this intellectual approach to our spiritual lives as a legacy of the Enlightenment era – when we learned to think in more systematic ways and to share knowledge – a great freedom for humanity in many ways.

But this reading indicates that this impulse to work it out in our minds is more profound, more deeply rooted.

These parables are all, in various ways, mind games meant to “decenter” us, as we would say in current parlance. They don’t make sense and aren’t meant to:

God’s kingdom, or reign, is like mustard – an invasive species.

It is like yeast – which in Jewish tradition was seen as a defilement or pollutant of flour – and the effect in the amount of flour in the parable would have been like an explosion of dough.

It is like treasure in a field – that one could obtain through not

divulging the presence of the treasure – in a sense deceiving the landowner.

It is like a pearl merchant going out of business in order to possess one pearl only. So is he still a pearl merchant? What’s the value of a pearl then?

It is fishing as if one knew nothing about fishing – and caught everything in the water.

And, to remind us of what I said last week – these dichotomies – like separating the fish compared with angels sending some one way or the other – heaven or hell – applies to everyone – not just a little group of “just us good people” vs “those bad people” – as we see in our political life in this country and globally these days. But a recognition that, in each of us, we are facing both good and bad – and, there is a tension in living amidst the shades of gray we know are present in our own lives, in our communities, in our whole experience of the world.

I’ve shared with you before the work of author and theologian Peter Rollins from his book *How (Not) to Speak of God*. There he writes about how we see God and in so doing he speaks about the nature of parables. And, in a sense he is saying that all of what we encounter in scripture and in our spiritual practices is like a parable.

Rollins writes: “the

revelation of God should be compared to a parable that speaks out of an *excess* of meaning. This means that revelation offers a wealth of meaning that will be able to speak in different ways to those with ears to hear.

“The parable is given to us, but at the same time its full wealth of meaning will **never be fully mined**. It is not reducible to some clear, singular, scientific formula but rather gives rise to a multitude of commentaries. In opposition to this, many Christian communities view the stories and parables of the Bible as raw material to be translated into a single, understandable meaning rather than experienced as infinitely rich treasures that can speak to us in a plurality of ways. Hence revelation ought not to be thought of either as that which makes God known or as that which leaves God unknown, but rather as the overpowering light that renders God known as unknown.”ⁱ

Rollins makes the point that God is not a “conceptual idol,” defined by what we understand or don’t understand. God cannot be confined by our thoughts and be said to be God any more than we can cast a little figurine out of gold or brass or plaster that we can bow down to and worship. Whatever it is that we understand or own or control – it isn’t God.

So parables tell us that our aim is not to get God small enough to be possessed and manipulated by us. Rather, we enter the radiance of God’s presence, and find ourselves in the fullness of all that is – our reality in the midst of all of reality.

Peter Rollins writes: “We are like an infant in the arms of God, unable to grasp but being transformed by the grasp.”

Our lives are often the vexing parables that confront us – and others’ lives, the life of the world are parables around us. Rollins writes that we may need to give up our need to always be right and to fully understand everything. We may need to find a way, in community, that will “open up the way for us to accept the fact that what is important is that we are embraced by the beloved rather than finding agreement concerning how we ought to understand this beloved (as if a baby can only really love her mother if she understands her).”

“God not only overflows and overwhelms our understanding but also overflows and overwhelms our experience.”ⁱⁱ

I’ve offered before Rollins’s analogy of the sunken ship where he says our relationship to God is like: “the idea of a ship sunken in the depths of the ocean: while the ship contains the water and the

water contains the ship, the ship only contains a fraction of the water while the water contains the whole of the ship. Our saturation by God does not merely fill us but also testifies to an ocean we cannot contain. Thus desire for God is born in God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So if we hear Jesus saying to us, in a crowd or all alone: “Do you understand all this?” We might say: “probably not...”

But we might ask: what’s the point if we aren’t supposed to understand God?

And the clue is in that notion of being transformed in the arms of one we cannot hold, but who holds

us.

And transformed for love and to love, as was the repeated message and example of Jesus.

As in the First Letter of John: “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is made complete in us ... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

Do we understand? Maybe a little, but not completely. Not very much, really.

Can we love and be loved?

Yes. Yes we can: a little, a lot, all through our lives.

ⁱ Rollins, Peter (2011-06-30). *How (Not) to Speak of God* (pp. 16-17). Paraclete Press.

ⁱⁱ Rollins, Peter (2011-06-30). *How (Not) to Speak of God* (pp. 16-17). Paraclete Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rollins, Peter (2011-06-30). *How (Not) to Speak of God* (p. 49). Paraclete Press.



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