

Sermon
Evening Eucharist and Ordination
June 6, 2008
21st Annual Assembly of the New England Synod

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Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23



Of all the gospel texts that I have ever been given for preaching at synod assemblies, this one is best suited to my present life situation – I just had to walk out my back door at the farm and proclaim: ...*a sower went out to sow...* and I got right into the groove.

One of the unusual aspects of this text is that it is already explained for us –
by Jesus, or the early church, or later commentators –
someone has not been able to resist revealing its deeper meaning –
just in case we thought it was only about farming.

It is a parable about the kingdom of God,
and someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure that we “get it”.

But don't you always wonder about the middle verses that are left out of these kinds of readings? Well, in this case – Matthew verses 9-17 – are all about people who hear, but do not listen, who see, but do not understand –
it's about the importance of parables,
but also about the importance of listening well –
so, maybe the worship committee took it out, figuring that I could be counted on to talk enough about listening at other times.

Enough mention of the importance of listening ... just remember that it isn't just your bishop who keeps talking about it, it's also Jesus ...

Anyway, when the seed lands in good soil – there is growth and a bountiful harvest – combines working night and day to be able to gather it all in.

There are people who listen intently, who open their hearts to welcome the seed, who add the spiritual *Miraclegro* of unceasing prayer and bible study – **AND** then (“celestial” music) – the kingdom takes root in their hearts and grows its way into their spirit and relationships and community and their congregation and the whole world.

But sometimes the seed lands in hearts that are not hospitable to it,
and the parable describes how it can fail to thrive:
birds eat the seed – and we're told they represent the devil –
snatching it away before it takes root;
thorns choke the seed –
they are the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.
Weak as the dollar is, it still has the power to choke us.

Seed can land in a layer of shallow soil – like soil frosting on a cake of rock – the seed is planted and at first seems to be growing well – but, alas – unlike in the New England Synod where we are “rooted for life,” deeply beneath all the rocks in our Yankee fields – the seed sometimes is not deeply rooted and inevitably withers and dies.

So, this text is inviting us to bemoan all the problems and challenges of the sowing of the seed:

How can we recognize the devil when he swoops down to snatch the seed?
How can we deepen the soil and get rid of all those rocks?
How can we pull the thorns of prosperity out of our hearts that choke the Word in our hearts? Preachers could go on forever about these things – ... and they do ... well, I know I do ...

But tonight let’s think about the miracle and the hope of the seeds that flourish – signs of God’s kingdom in our hearts and in the world.

Part of God’s good news is that the kingdom IS growing in us, growing among us, through us, in the world, relentlessly, mysteriously, powerfully, beautifully – there is no shortage of good soil; God’s Word is taking root in hearts.

In the bible, the only thing that Jesus talked about more than money is the kingdom of God – he told us in a hundred ways how to find it, how to value it, how to strive for it, give up everything else for it, live in it – it is always there.

But outside of praying regularly: “Thy kingdom come” –
What are we are called to do as workers in the kingdom?

Once upon a time, I sowed seed in a garden in New Jersey. It landed in good soil and the harvest was amazing; and I took full credit for every onion, every tomato, every green pepper and eggplant; they were the best in town.

(Also, my zucchinis were huge and, at the time, I thought that was terrific – until I discovered eventually that the real challenge with zucchinis is to get rid of them.)

Well, one day I was standing by my garden, unapologetically proud, looking over my magnificent harvest, when a neighbor approached and stood next to me. And, together, we silently beheld my glorious kingdom of vegetables.

Nice garden, he said.

Yes, I said – sighing the satisfied sigh of the successful sower.

Then he said – **Of course, anything would grow in this soil, it’s the spot where Old Man Anderson kept his chickens for 20 years. It’s got 20 years of chicken droppings worked into it – best fertilizer there is.**

And so I learned that what I had done was to be a faithful steward in the care of the garden –
and the sun, the rain and the chickens did the rest.

Now, without belaboring that analogy...
we are called to be “stewards of the mysteries of God” –
called to be faithful and trustworthy workers in the kingdom, but
we are called also to a spirit of humility, because God will prepare the soil.

In fact, sometimes when we feel most weak and discouraged,
then that is when God can really shift into high gear
because we have stopped behaving as though it’s all up to us;
we move over and make room for the Holy Spirit,
who can accomplish what would be impossible for us to do alone.

Looking at our world today,
sometimes it seems practically impossible to see kingdom.

A New England Synod delegation returned recently
from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the schools and the churches of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and the facts on the ground
of the situation are not better, but worse –
more illegal settlements are being built and expanded,
more people are kept from their jobs, children are kept from medical attention,
more people are separated, and the wall is not just about security –
it is about taking away more Palestinian land.

The situation seems impossible.

I think of the challenges for our brothers and sisters in Honduras –
poverty and illness and catastrophic weather – it is overwhelming.

And the situation seems impossible.

I think about immigrants in our own country –
alongside of the desperate need for reform of immigration laws,
families are being torn apart, children are separated from their parents,
detention centers have inhumane conditions.

The situation seems impossible.

But when I begin to feel that the hope of the kingdom is being suffocated or slipping
away,

I remember times when God did the impossible –
when the Israelites escaped from Egypt
when apartheid ended in South Africa
when the Berlin wall came down
and when negotiation and a commitment to reconciliation
instead of revenge resulted in peace.

God is always at work doing the impossible, growing the kingdom.

It's not a beanstalk that we ride up to heaven;
it's a strong, strong spreading tree that houses and feeds and brings justice to
the world, and we get to help God do that –
we discover the deep joy of working by God's side – with God in us and around
us – with our brothers and sisters around the world.

And what is the training required for this holy partnership?

Just the opposite of what the world might lead you to believe – it's a paradox – the more
we rest and trust in God, the more effective our work will be. So we have to be careful.

We need to observe the Sabbath –

When we take time for renewal and restoration
we are better able to listen and respond to the Spirit,
who directs us in the life and work of the kingdom.

We need to pray more.

We're going to be thinking about this in the synod for the whole next year –
so we can work on this together.

We need to laugh more

It is just as holy to laugh as to sing, pray or pontificate – maybe more so.

We need to read the bible

The bible is not a literal moral handbook, a club to beat people with or
a talisman to keep on your book shelf to bring good luck, or a coffee table book
so people will see your holiness.

It is the manger in which you find the living word;
it is a well to go to – to quench your spiritual thirst.

We need to use our imagination more than our reason

Rather un-Lutheran –
but if we imagine six impossible things before breakfast every day,
the way that the Queen told Alice in Wonderland to do,
maybe one of those impossible plans will be God's plan for our life.

And we need to walk with others before we do things for them

We are "Walking together in Mission" with our companion synods,
and this way of accompaniment in place of charity
is not a new-fangled word, and yet captures the idea of a transformation of spirit
that allows us to learn and grow, with a new humility.

In these relationships with our companion synods,
and in all the many places in our own lives where we have the chance
to accompany someone in their walk of life,
we receive more than we give.

The rhythm of giving and receiving is a sign of the kingdom – the opposite of giving is accumulation –

And we find joy and we find Jesus in very unexpected places.

We need to rest, pray, laugh, dream, take a walk –

these are the paradoxical fitness exercises for work in the kingdom.

All of these activities will help us to grow spiritually –

let's not think first about doing – but about growing –
and then we will grow into the doing.

When we follow Jesus' commandment to love one another,
that's when kingdom things will happen

even when we are not so sure that we are being effective.

In a small and personal way, the things we do for our children are examples. Small things done in love are always seeds planted in good soil.

Years ago, a friend of my mother's was a frenzied and weary single mom –

“back in the day” when polyester hadn't been invented
and little boys needed little cotton shirts to be ironed for school.

My mother's friend was always, always doing things at the last minute,

and so, every morning, she would iron the shirt for the day, all the while feeling guilty because she was not a better mother.

Then came Parents' Visiting Day –

she took the afternoon off from work, and went to the school, where she stood in front of a bulletin board of pictures that the children had drawn in response to the assignment from the teacher to draw a picture to illustrate how they knew that their parents loved them.

She located her son's drawing; it was a picture of her standing at the ironing board, and underneath was the caption, dictated by her son and written neatly by the teacher which read:

**My Mom loves me so much
that she makes sure I have a warm shirt to wear to school every day.**

Any act done in love is always a sign of God's kingdom –

even when done in weariness or uncertainty – or even sometimes in despair.

When the seed of the word is sown in our hearts,

the harvest will always be one of love and justice and peace.

This evening, we will be ordaining two new brothers into the ministry of Word and Sacrament – (looking at William Kroeze and Joshua Rinas) – you have been called to sow the seeds of the Word into the hearts of the people to whom you will preach, and to preside at the mystery of the transformation of water and wine and bread into signs of God's grace.

William and Joshua –

Remember the chickens – you only have to sow the seed and care for the garden – God will prepare the soil for you.

But you might want to do a little rototilling – stirring up and turning over the soil of hearts is a good thing – it rearranges the old ruts and creates openings to make room for the Holy Spirit to move around in there so that the seeds will be able to grow.

And remember the paradoxical ways to fit yourself for kingdom work – rest, pray, laugh, read, imagine, and take lots of walks.

Keep in mind that nowadays peoples' hearts, even the hearts of the most faithful parishioners, are moving targets.

In our time and culture we keep expecting to find meaning in busyness – a busyness that keeps us so connected to schedules and computers and phones and TVs that our hearts and our minds are like jumping beans.

You are called to be teachers and spiritual guides who will help people to: slow down, and listen well, and find enough stillness so that the Word can find its mark and take root in their hearts.

The kingdom of God is present in our world– and you need to help people to identify it, and strive for it – beyond Thanksgiving baskets and Christmas toys.

You see, there is a way in which doing charitable acts keeps us from sometimes doing justice,

and you must call people to the full range of kingdom work: taking pilgrimages to places that have been made holy by the suffering there, taking part in peace-keeping and letter-writing to insist on justice, advocating for people who have no other voice; and turning outward instead of inward in our Christians lives.

As Christ is really present in this bread and wine that we will share this evening and always – he is really present with us in the work of the kingdom – because that is one of the main ways in which he guides us all into eternal life.

And so, Josh and Will – I know God will give you the strength to fulfill this call, and I pray this evening that you will always be so fully and joyfully aware of God's presence that the seeds you sow will always bear fruit. Amen.