

Making the Difficult Clear

Mark 4: 30-32

(preached June 16, 2024)

The moral or meaning of this parable is that the Kingdom of Heaven may start small but has the potential to grow and expand to offer refuge and sustenance to many.

This morning, I want to start with the Parable of the Mustard Seed and then explain my own parable using my interest in quilting.

To start – what exactly is a parable and why did Jesus use them? A parable is a simple story or event used to illustrate a complex idea.

In Matthew 13:13 Jesus explains “This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”

His message was entirely new to the people of Israel most of whom could not read or write. They were not dumb, just uneducated.

As we read Jesus’s teachings watch for the words LIKE and AS and metaphors meaning he compares one thing to another using unrelated elements. Recall your school grammar classes.

For example, Jesus used the illustration of nets and boats when he was speaking to fishermen. This they could understand. Remember Jesus telling Peter and his brother “You will be fishers of men.”

In Matthew 14: 47-51 Jesus tells his disciples the Parable of the Net:

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets but threw the bad away. (now for the comparison) This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw the wicked into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things? Jesus asked. Yes, they replied.

He used seeds and harvest when he was speaking to farmers and gardeners. This they understood. This is the Parable of the Sower. His disciples understood what would happen to seed planted in good soil versus seeds planted on rocky soil or sown among thorns.

And one more. Jesus talked about yeast and flour when he was speaking to women and bakers. Again, an everyday image which he used to illustrate a complex thought. Without yeast, the best that could be made was a flat cracker or unleavened bread. Like matzah which is made without yeast. Jews eat matzah during Passover to remind them of the manna provided by God in the desert when Moses was leading his people out of Egypt.

Now today each listener or reader will hear a distinct message and find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time. Reducing a parable to a single meaning limits its potential for our understanding. Reading a parable when we are 50 will be different from reading the same verses when we were 10. As we mature and have different experiences in our own lives, we begin to see things from different angles and in a new light. It is important that we allow ourselves to be open to current information and the revelation of new interpretations.

I digress for a moment. My mother had a saying that I have adopted:
Love many, trust few
And always paddle your own canoe.

Think here about the “paddle your own canoe” phrase. This is a modern parable about the direction of your life. This means YOU are in charge and you set the direction. If you are not paddling, you are just floating at the mercy of the current and wind or whoever controls the paddle.

Now to my own parable:

As seeds are to farmers so too are small pieces of fabric to quilters. And I am a quilter. I love the feel of cloth, the variety of colors and patterns and the potential for making something beautiful, useful and appreciated. Quilters are known to have a STASH (not a moustache) a collection of fabrics in bins, cupboards and bags. We like to look at our fabrics, touch them, admire them and think about what they might become. Some we like so much we never cut them but just keep them. We treasure them. Quilting fabrics can also be from clothes passed down or saved from children. Or also obtained in exchanges with other quilters.

The parable or meaning here is fabric is like a variety of people. Many colors, textures, ages, and experiences. We need this variety to make life interesting. Just one color is bland. We need contrast which makes each piece stand out. This makes living worthwhile.

To make a quilt, the fabric yardage must first be cut into pieces. Many many small pieces. If you stop there, you have nothing but a pile of scraps. The point here is to have a pattern – a plan. I like to have lists and an action plan. This was important in my business

career. Action plans with goals, steps and timetables. Not a plan that is restrictive but one that gives freedom because there is direction and purpose. Of course, there may be changes and different opportunities but the basis here is that we have direction.

Lastly I want to share thoughts from the VMI valedictorian Virginia Townsend, class of 2024. She shared a favorite story told by Holocaust survivor and Christian writer Corrie ten Boom during the Nazi occupation of Holland. She was about 60 and a Christian when Anne Frank, a Jew, was 12. I add this because I think you will know about Anne Frank's story and her death in a concentration camp. Corrie ten Boom survived her years in a concentration camp but members of her family were killed.

Corrie ten Boom used a small tapestry as an object lesson during public speaking appearances. Saying "Our lives are like watching a tapestry being made from the backside. You get occasional glimpses of what the front might look like, but mostly, it just seems like a colorful mess of knots and tangled threads. It is not until the weaver is finished that you can turn it over and look at the front to see the amazing and intricate pattern that was being made there all along."

My quilt in process is like that tapestry. The back has seams, threads and intersections that disguise the pattern and colors. The finished product – be it a quilt or us – looks messy from one direction but lovely and intricate from the other.

Let us look for the variety in our friends and neighbors. In the person sitting near you this morning. What we see on the surface could hide so much more. Just as Jesus selected his disciples and apostles from among strangers who later formed a cohesive group, let us extend our circle from a small start – like the mustard seed- and grow our church into our neighborhood, our town and out into the world.

Amen

Elizabeth Miller Grasty