

Sermon: Story Time
Text: Matthew 13 selected verses
Date: November 25, 2018
Context: WWPCCC
Thanksgiving Service and Harvest Celebration
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And he told them many things in parables . . .

Matthew 13:3a

I have mentioned this story before but I think it bears repeating today. It's a brief story, about how an enterprising social scientist took an interest in religious literacy among younger Americans. Or more specifically, the decline in religious literacy.

So he found a group of willing subjects and gave them just one question: *Who first said the phrase, "Blessed are the peacemakers?"*

This was not a multiple choice question. This was fill in the blank.

The number one response he got was Oprah. Coming in second was Bono.

I can't honestly recall if Jesus even cracked the top five. But just to be clear, that is the right answer. It was Jesus who first said, *Blessed are the peacemakers*.

But where he said it is also worth noting.

I mentioned that the brief passage I read a moment ago is from the Gospel of Matthew. For those of you who may not know this, Matthew is one of four books in the New Testament formally known as Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

That word, gospel, is from the Greek. In English, it means Good News. The writers of these stories believed that who Jesus was, and what he came to teach and to do, was Good News.

So, together, these four gospels contain the best record we have of Jesus' life and ministry.

It so happens that Matthew's version contains the most famous sermon Jesus ever preached. It's called the Sermon on the Mount and it's where we find some of Jesus' most well-known sayings and most important teachings.

Here's the juicy part, the back story that leads up to that sermon:

Jesus had been traveling throughout the countryside, sharing his message with people and doing his thing.

Mostly he was teaching his followers about love and justice and peace. These are the main ingredients for what he called the Kingdom of God. Nowadays, in more inclusive language, we might say the realm of God, or the reign of God.

He also healed many people of their diseases and liberated others from physically crippling conditions, or socially oppressive conditions that had held them captive, sometimes for many years.

Which is to say, he didn't just tell people about the Realm of God, he showed his followers what it looked like

Not surprisingly, crowds began to follow him, like the tail on a comet. So one day, seeing this great mass of people trailing in his wake, he sat them all down and climbed up on a little hillside and started to preach.

It's like he suddenly realized this was his one chance to reach such a large crowd all at once. Because he sort of unloads.

In one long sermon, he gives the crowds basically a semester's worth of teaching on what his program was all about, including the things ordinary people can do so that they might live extraordinary lives.

He starts out with what are called the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

And, yes, *Blessed are the peacemakers for theirs is the kingdom of God.*

He then assures his listeners that it's true what Torah says – the ancient book of Jewish Law –you must love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

But then he takes it up a notch. Apparently Jesus believed that neighbor love alone isn't enough if we're going to have any shot at living in the kind of world God intends for us to inhabit. To realize God's reign on earth, to live in God's realm in the here and now, we must go beyond ordinary love. We must also love our enemies.

You'd think the crowd might have emptied out when they heard that little gem, but that doesn't seem to have happened.

And a good thing, too, for some of the best parts of this sermon were still to come.

To help his followers reach the goal of realizing God's realm in the here and now, he teaches them how to pray for it, saying, *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come thy will be done . . . where? . . . on earth as it is in heaven.*

With that done, he offers these final words, words intended to comfort all of us who ever feel anxious about meeting life's many demands.

That may include you this morning. Some of you have final exams and big papers due, just around the corner.

Some of you have family coming this week and loads of things to do before they arrive, and still more things to do after they arrive, so many things, in fact, they're keeping you up at night.

To all of us stressed out travelers, here is what Jesus says:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Put all these pieces together -- the beatitudes, the teachings about love and prayer, the assurance that we need not be anxious because God's intention is to bless us and provide for us -- and the Sermon on the Mount is a literary, ethical and theological tour de force.

The precepts and teachings Jesus gives us here have directly influenced some of the most notable spiritual leaders of our time, including Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And, oh yes, Oprah and Bono, too.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Love your enemies. Our Father who art in heaven. Seek ye first the kingdom of God.

Now, you might assume that for the rest of his time on earth Jesus continues in this vain, preaching sermons full of moral and ethical precepts.

Which would not be a surprise because that's what most people think the Christian faith is about -- a bunch of precepts and rules and doctrines.

If that's what you think comes next, you are in for a surprising plot twist. But you shouldn't feel bad because no one could have foreseen what Jesus does next.

He begins to tell stories.

He trades highly abstract ethical and theological instruction "Do not judge so that you are not judged" "Love your enemies" for simple little stories spun around concrete references drawn from everyday life.

They're called parables, and they feature farmers and seeds, yeast and bread, nets and fish, lost coins and lost sheep. These stories, filled with these simple images, become Jesus's main teaching device for the rest of his ministry.

Bible scholars have devoted a great deal of time and ink to resolving the question of why Jesus makes this shift, from sermon to story, lecture to narrative. But I think the explanation may be fairly simple.

After listening to Jesus drone on for what must have seemed like forever, one of his disciples may have finally worked up enough courage to do what a lot of us have probably wanted to do when we're suffering through an over-long sermon. What maybe some of you want to do at this very moment, in fact . . .

He reaches out and taps the great preacher on the shoulder.

Ah, Jesus.

Yes, what is it? Jesus replies slightly irritated to have been interrupted.

Don't you think it might be time to give it a rest? I know all this stuff is desperately important and all—and I hate to say this, promise you won't get mad—but frankly it's getting kind of boring. In fact, if I'm not mistaken a couple of people out there have actually fallen asleep. What else you got? Anything a little lighter? A joke, perhaps? Or maybe a story?

The truth is no one really knows why Jesus shifts gears so fundamentally, from an abstract lecture to story time. The text itself gives us no explanation, no rationale for the decision. But what the text doesn't tell us, our hearts do. For who doesn't love a good story? Stories are main way we learn about our families, our country, our traditions.

Hearing your Uncle Wally tell how his father -- your grandfather -- arrived on Ellis Island, with no money in his pocket, and no formal papers granting him entry into America, tells you a lot about your grandfather, and about your family history, and about America then--when we offered immigrants a warm welcome, and about America now--when we want to build walls to exclude them.

And from this point on in Matthew's gospel, stories serve as the tool Jesus uses to teach us about God. Or not God, exactly, but about the kingdom of God – the one story, the one message, the one reality he's wanted to get across from the very beginning.

What's so surprising about this technique, the thing that what would drive my old Baptist Sunday school teachers crazy, is that there's no right answer, no one answer, to the question of what a story means.

If the question is, what is the realm of God like, then there's no way to give one specific, definitive reply.

And why is that? One reason is because the meaning of stories is open and dynamic.

They are meant to interact with your life, with what you believe and with what you think, and how you feel, and what you've been taught. Sometimes to challenge those things, sometimes to illuminate them, so you can come to understand life in general, and your life in particular, in new ways, bigger ways.

"A sower goes out to sow," Jesus says in an earlier parable. And that's exactly what he does here.

He flings these stories out into the world for all of us to hear them, and for them to go deep into the soil of your heart, into the ground of your being and there to take root and grow.

It's a method that could hardly be more fitting on this Thanksgiving Sunday when we celebrate the earth's bounty, a harvest that comes to us thanks to farmers and seeds and rain and gardens.

The history of Warren Wilson College, and of Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church, is full of such stories, including stories about this harvest tradition that we are celebrating today--stories about a vocal turkey that apparently did not like what it was hearing from the pulpit and so tried to drown it out, gobbling so hard no one could hear Fred Ohler.

Or about the rooster that went rogue and started cockle-doodle doing right from the edge of the lectern, apparently believing it had been called to help lead our worship service, until Asher went all Ninja and snuck up on the unsuspecting creature, and grabbed it so fast it was like it got hit by lightning. And it might as well have been, because it did not utter another peep.

One last point. Jesus uses parables partly because their meaning is not fixed. Unlike doctrine and dogma, they are living things, and they are meant to interact dynamically with your own life and experience.

But the other reason he tells stories to describe the realm of God is because nothing else will do. It's too big to describe it any other way. It's a realm filled with surprises. A realm of such grace and bounty, of such boundary-breaking love and radical welcome, that there's no other way to explain what it looks like.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, Jesus says. So the question isn't just what does Jesus mean by that? The question is what do you hear in that?

The kingdom of God is like leaven that makes bread rise. The kingdom of God is like a group of students filling this sanctuary with bounty from these fields that surround us.

The kingdom of God is like a group of people filling up shopping bags from the grocery store with cans of beans and corn, with boxes of macaroni and cheese and stuffing mix, and tubs of butter and bottles of cooking oil, so that hungry people might be fed.

The kingdom of God is like millions of families gathering around tables laden with turkey and stuffing, and vegan loaf, and cranberry relish and pumpkin pie.

The kingdom of God is like those same families, including the family that will gather in our Fellowship Hall on Thanksgiving Day, inviting the stranger, or the student, or the newcomer, to join this family and share in that feast.

What is the realm of God like? What do you think?