

**7 Pentecost
July 23, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning we heard Jesus tell a parable about a man who sowed a crop of “good seed” in his field, only to have his enemy come during the night and sow weeds alongside the good seed. And last week we heard another parable about sowing seeds ... some landing in rocks, some in thin soil, some in thorns and some in good soil. That reading ... which immediately precedes this one ... includes the verse, “And he spoke to them in parables.” During this summer we will hear other parables, and other stories from the Gospel of Matthew ... it is Matthew’s turn in the rotation of the lectionary readings.

In both last week’s reading, and this week’s reading, the writer of Matthew’s gospel has Jesus explain the parable to his disciples. Today, many scholars believe that this is an editorial addition by the writer of Matthew’s gospel ... the scholarly consensus is that Jesus didn’t actually speak these words, but rather the author of Matthew’s gospel added them later. It is believed that Jesus told the parables without any explanation thus prompting those who were listening to begin their own conversations about what the parable might mean. In other words, in the parable we heard this morning the disciples might ask each other “What does it mean to sow good seed?” “Why would someone want to sow weeds alongside the good seed, and why at night?” “What kind of weeds would they have been?” “Why is Jesus telling us a story about farming and this farmer’s enemy?” “What does all this have to do with us and the way we live our lives?” And ... I will add that we might be asking similar questions ... “Who is sowing the weeds in the field of good seed in the world around us?”

People learn best when they figure things out for themselves, and I think Jesus knew that, and that is why he taught in parables. I’m not saying that these editorial additions which explain the parables are necessarily wrong. I just think they take something away from the experience. By giving the reader the answer it sacrifices the questions that could be asked.

Jesus was not a didactic teacher. He started conversations. A parable might mean one thing to one person and another thing to another. He wasn’t going to put it in a box. The writer of Matthew was uncomfortable with this, so he built the box to put it in. Many preachers do the same ... I imagine that I do that from time to time myself. But I don’t think that is what Jesus had in mind.

In Matthew's gospel, before this section where Jesus begins speaking in parables, there are the stories of Jesus healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons. For example, in just a few short verses at the beginning of the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel we hear of the paralytic who picks up his pallet and walks; the woman who was hemorrhaging for over a decade has her health restored; two blind men are made to see; a 12 year-old girl is brought back to life; and a man so bound by demons that he cannot speak is given his voice back. Then the author of Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus went around Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom ... God's realm ... and curing every disease and sickness. And the text tells us that when he saw the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were "harassed and helpless."

I think Matthew structured his story of Jesus to give some answers to those who were "harassed" and felt "helpless." What was true then is true today. This isn't just a story about Jesus 2,000 years ago; it is also a story about you and me in the here and now. Maybe you are one of those rare people who has never felt "harassed or helpless," who has never had illness invade your body or the body of someone close to you, who has always been at ease with themselves and never known dis-ease. Maybe you are one of those exceptional individuals who has always been fully alive to themselves and the world around them, included in every group, and always in control of their wants and desires. If you are one of those extraordinary souls then I hope you thank God every night ... but most of the people I know have felt "harassed" or "helpless" at some time in their life.

When I look into the faces of this congregation I see many who have shared with me their struggle with demons in their lives ... with feeling like an outcast even in this diverse and inclusive community ... people who feel like their life is a dead end and want desperately to feel alive again. And they come to this place ... to this community of faith ... seeking compassion, even if your condition goes unspoken. The people of St. Cyprian's are no different than anyone else ... this is the human condition.

My guess is that Jesus' life was not conveniently separated into a time when he did healing and exorcisms, and then stopped that activity and moved on to teaching in parables. I think that is just a literary device of the author of Matthew's gospel. I imagine Jesus teaching and healing all at the same time. And this is what his disciples saw him doing.

When Jesus called his disciples he said:

*"As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'
Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."*

So just what is the "good news?" And to those who feel harassed and helpless, how does "God's kingdom come near?"

The “good news” is that we are beloved children of God. God wants for us to live full and whole lives, in spite of the dis-ease that may enter our lives, or the existential death we may live with, or the prejudices we may face, or our struggle with desires stronger than we can control. Instead of being a victim to these forces, God calls us to live in the image of the divine. Instead of dis-ease God wants wholeness. Instead of death God wants us to be fully alive. Instead of casting out, God wants us to include. Instead of being ruled by our life-robbing cravings God wants us to be faithful choice-makers for that which nurtures life.

How do we know? We know this through the life, example and teachings of Jesus. If ever there was a faithful choice-maker, Jesus was it. Jesus included all those who were deemed unclean by society and the religious establishment. Not only did Jesus bring life to those who were dead ... figuratively and literally ... but his own resurrection is the testament to being fully alive even when the world is out to kill you. Jesus touched people with his compassion and caring, and in his presence they knew that God ... and God’s kingdom ... God’s realm ... had come near.

Jesus taught his disciple that they, too, could live the divine life of God’s image. They, too, could cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Jesus sent his disciples forth into Galilee. After his death and resurrection, they went out into all the world. And now we are those disciples.

This is about knowing the faith that Jesus knew. At his baptism he heard a voice from heaven, “You are my beloved.” We are all beloved children of God ... no less beloved than Jesus. We are called to live our lives in God’s image, just as Jesus did. We are called to be faithful choice-makers, whole people living fully in God’s creation. As a community we are invited to share that way of life with the world around us so those who are dis-eased by the world, feeling dead in their lives, marginalized in our society, controlled by their desires ... those that the text calls “harassed and helpless” ... that they may know the compassion of God through us, just as the people in Jesus’ time knew God’s compassion in the face of Jesus and his disciples.

But we begin by looking in the mirror, not just at our face but deep into our own eyes so that we might see our own souls. What dis-ease do you see that needs healing within you? In what part of your life do you merely exist rather than live fully? What of your being ... your personality ... your existence ... what part of your Self do you marginalize and discount? And what demons lurk in the darkness of your psyche? It is only when we have compassion for ourselves that we can even see that God’s kingdom ... God’s realm ... has come near to us. It is only when we accept that we are beloved children of God that we can be available to show compassion to others.

Jesus taught in parables. We heard the parable of the good seed and weeds this morning, and we heard Jesus explain the parable ... and I believe it is explained in Matthew’s words. That doesn’t make the explanation wrong. It only means that it

affects the conversation ... it has a way of silencing the questions. I think there is more to it than that.

Before Jesus taught in parables ... at least in Matthew's gospel ... Jesus saw the crowds and he had compassion on them because they were "harassed and helpless," and he cured every disease and sickness. And throughout Matthew's gospel ... as well as in Mark, Luke and John ... Jesus brought God's kingdom ... God's realm ... near to those he taught by the example of his life ... choice-maker, living fully alive, nurturing wholeness in himself and those around him. He empowered his disciples to do the same. And he empowers us in the very same way. This is what taking seriously what Jesus took seriously really means.

Amen.