

**16 Pentecost  
September 24, 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.**

The parable of the vineyard workers. Hurricane Irma. The earthquake in Mexico City. What ... if anything ... might these have in common? Last Sunday I asked you ... the congregation ... to tell me about where and how you found God in the midst of a hurricane and its aftermath. We heard stories of acts of kindness and compassion between friends ... and amongst strangers. We heard about seeing the other ... no matter how different ... as being in the same boat and being a fellow child of God. But what I didn't hear were the questions ... Why did one person get flooded out and not another? What about all the devastation in the Caribbean islands where poverty is rampant and infrastructure is weak? What about the 10 persons who died in a nursing home in south Florida? What about the feeling of despair that is overwhelming some people ... some of my friends and neighbors? And now we can add all the questions about the earthquake.

So how is the parable of the vineyard workers and the effects of Hurricane Irma, and the earthquake in Mexico related ... if at all? I believe the answer is in the question ... or, more specifically ... in the questions.

Let me begin by saying that this parable of the vineyard workers is often preached as an allegory. In this allegory God is the vineyard owner whose love extends to all no matter how late they come to the game. That may well be true, but I don't think that is the point of the parable ... it is a parable after all. The parable asks questions ... the allegory gives an answer. I think God is found in the questions ... not in the answer. I think we find the divine presence of God by living the questions.

I would like to visit this parable of the vineyard workers for a few moments. The image of vineyard workers gathered in the marketplace waiting for a vineyard owner and his steward to come and hire them as day labor was obviously a common sight in the time of Jesus. That is why Jesus chose to use this familiar image as he told his parable and said, "The kingdom of God is like ..." Two thousand years later it is still a common sight, even here in Florida. There are a couple of pickup sites for day labor just down the road in Hastings ... at the car wash, and over where the railroad tracks cross Main Street. The same is true in most cities and towns around the country. Gathering on street corners, or in empty parking lots, or at convenience stores, men ... and sometimes women ... congregate early in the morning hoping that someone will come to give them a day's work ... and a day's wage.

In the time of Jesus these day laborers were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The wages for a day's work was one denarii, and evidence indicates that a denarii was essentially what it would cost for a family to live for a day. If a laborer was hired he could feed his family. If he was not hired his family had to do without. To be a day laborer meant that one had no land of their own to work; no plot of ground to plant a garden. And it is very possible that the day laborer who would have worked in a vineyard was actually working on land where he had once lived.

A vineyard, in many ways, was a symbol of the abuse of the economic system. The land for the vineyard was often acquired in a foreclosure; evicting a peasant and his family from their home and garden. Then the investment in a vineyard was extraordinary ... the cost of grape vines and arbors, and the labor to build and plant. And, of course, once planted it took several years for a vineyard to actually produce grapes. Whoever owned the vineyard not only had acquired the land, but he also had money to invest in it ... and time to wait for a return. The gospels are full of stories of how this system worked in the time of Jesus ... and how it was abused by the wealthy and powerful against the poor and disenfranchised.

If nothing changes ... nothing changes! In 2,000 years not a whole lot has changed for those people who live on that bottom rung of the ladder. And vineyards, and orchards, and cash-crop farms are still being planted upon foreclosed land. And day laborers are still being picked up in the marketplace.

Can you imagine the mixed feelings those vineyard workers must have had in that situation? On the one hand I would suppose that they were grateful whenever they were hired for work. On the other hand I can also picture a degree of resentment against the vineyard owner and the system that controlled their lives. And if the day laborers were not hired, I can also imagine their despair.

The parable goes on to tell us that ALL the workers who were hired received a full day's wage ... even those who worked only a few hours. That was very generous of the vineyard owner. However, the vineyard owner intentionally had his steward call those who had worked only a few hours and they were paid first. Seeing the generosity of the vineyard owner the laborers who had worked all day in the hot sun expected that they might actually receive more ... but it was not to be. One of them grumbled, and he told to leave ... exiled from the group of workers ... probably never to be hired again. I think that if I had been one of the other laborers and had observed that exchange between the vineyard owner and the disgruntled worker I would have learned the lesson to keep my mouth shut, or else!

So, Jesus begins this parable with "The kingdom of God is like ..." Just how is the kingdom of God like this story? As I mentioned, there are some who want to make it an allegory: equating the vineyard owner with God, and the laborers with all of us in our

various stages of coming to the fullness of faith. As an allegory the moral of the story is that God is a loving and generous God who will fully accept us, even at the very end of the day. In this case the story is not treated as a parable ... open ended with questions to be explored ... but rather as an answer ... THE answer ... case closed.

However, Jesus told this as a parable, not an allegory. Therefore, it is open-ended ... with questions to be explored ... questions to be lived. So, I want to know, how this story about the poorest of the poor working at the mercy of one of those with considerable wealth ... how is this like the kingdom of God. And, I want to know how, 2,000 years later, those day laborers in Hastings ... just fifteen miles from here ... are like the kingdom of God.

I don't know the answer ... but somehow I know that God is in the question. It is in the inner dialogue that I come to know God in ways that I could not know with mere answers that are provided by some other authority. I believe that is why Jesus taught in parables ... not answers, but questions ... you figure it out for yourself.

So, I want to know how the kingdom of God is like this landowner who went out to hire day laborers. And all summer long we heard Jesus tell parables beginning with "The kingdom of God is like ..." I want to know how the kingdom of God is like someone who sowed good seed, and then at night an enemy came and sowed weeds amongst the good seed. (Matt 13:24)

I want to know how the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that can consume a garden like an invasive species. (Matt 13:31)

I want to know how the kingdom of God is like yeast mixed into dough. (Matt 13:33) Or a treasure hidden in a field. (Matt 13:44) Or a pearl of great value. (Matt 13:45) Or the net thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. (Matt 13:47) Or the king settling his accounts with his slaves. (Matt 18:23)

Each of these parables can be allegorized: each character or element being symbolic of something else. But, they are not allegories; they are parables. When Jesus told these parables I'm sure that the people who heard them were as confused as the rest of us. They had questions that seemed to not have answers. And, I imagine that these parables began lots of discussions about how in the world this or that could be "like the kingdom of God." These stories were of familiar situations or sometimes exaggerations of ordinary circumstances the people could relate to. So, they would look around them and say, "How is the kingdom of God like this?" And, they lived the questions.

Is it any different for us today? Yes, in the aftermath of a Hurricane ... or two ... or a devastating earthquake in our own hemisphere ... we can see God's hand at work in the way people can really be the people God made them to be. But there are also the

questions. And I believe that by exploring those questions we can find God there as well. I think living the questions can bring us to know the divine presence of God.

Some would say that the kingdom of God is in the future, perhaps even at the end of time. Some would say that the kingdom of God is in some other place. But for Jesus the kingdom of God was not somewhere else; rather he said “it is among you, inside you, and outside you.” The kingdom of God was not some time in the future, “for it is here, spread out in front of you over all the earth;” people just don’t see it.

Instead of seeing the kingdom of God as some perfect world in some other time and place, I believe Jesus was telling his listeners to open their eyes and see it in the world around them by living the questions. And he tells us to do the same. We are the kingdom of God when we incarnate justice and compassion. We are the kingdom of God when we pull hurricane fallen tree limbs to the curb for a complete stranger. We are the kingdom of God when we give of our financial resources to help those in the Caribbean, or Mexico City. We are the kingdom of God when we break the yoke of economic oppression on the poorest of the poor. It means opening our eyes literally and figuratively.

The kingdom of God breaks in upon the kingdom of the world when we see the world as God sees the world. The kingdom of God exists in our lives when we feel with deep empathy the plight of those in the Caribbean and Mexico City. The kingdom of God breaks into our lives when we are awakened out of our blindness and see how systemic poverty holds our brothers and sisters in a constant state of risk. The kingdom of God becomes a reality in our lives when we welcome the outcasts ... and welcome the part of ourselves that we have cast out.

God created this world and declared it “good” ... all of it. The parables of Jesus caused his listeners to re-imagine the way they saw the world. The parables of Jesus are supposed to cause us ... 2,000 years later ... to re-imagine the way we see the world. The parables of Jesus compel us to live the questions.

The kingdom of God is like a hurricane or an earthquake ... and the human response to those disasters. The kingdom of God is like ... a man in a pickup truck hiring day laborers on at a car wash just 15 miles from here. The kingdom of God is now; it is spread upon the earth; it is inside you, and it outside you. All we need to do is open our eyes with deep empathy and compassion to those who are feeling effects of those disaster ... and then to live the questions that arise in our own minds.

The kingdom of God is like ...

Amen.