

Hope in the Midst of Despair  
Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23  
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(Sunday after 2016 American Election)

Do your ears hang low, do they wobble to and fro?  
Can you tie 'em in a knot, can you tie 'em in a bow?  
Can you throw 'em o'er your shoulder like a continental soldier?  
Do your ears hang low?

So do any of you have ears? Then, as Jesus said, "Let anyone who has ears, hear."

That's what Jesus said to his audiences of Galilean peasants: "Listen, pay attention to the parable of the Kingdom of God!" And pay attention to your ears and how you hear this parable and its message. He names four kinds of ears: 1) "ears that hear and do not understand, 2) ears that hear and receive the message of the Kingdom with joy but when trouble or persecution happens, they fall away; 3) ears that hear but get distracted by the cares and conflicts of the world and the lure of wealth and the message is choked; and finally ears that hear, understand and bear fruit." What kind of ears do you have? Hmmm. Jesus is saying, Pay attention to your ears.

The parable of the sower was one of the four most popular parables of Jesus, the only parables that made it into all three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Two of the other most popular were the mustard seed and the leaven that we have recently remembered in this series on the parables of Matthew 13. Why was this parable so memorable? And what did it mean for the audiences of Jesus and of Matthew?

First, Jesus' audiences. Jesus mainly taught Galilean peasants, most of whom were farmers. Imagine a group of illiterate Galilean peasants, who lived at a subsistence level on the food they could grow in their fields, gathered around Jesus, often around the edges of their fields. The parable is a description of their work. Galilean farmers worked in the fields that surrounded their villages. Each day they walked through the paths between the fields to get to their own fields. Many Galilean fields had shallow soil. Parts of the fields were often rocky and weeds were always a big problem. Each spring they would sow the seed by throwing seeds out onto the bare ground and then plowing the ground to cover the seeds. They threw the seeds everywhere in their fields because in a good year, they would get something from the edges of the paths and the rocky and thorny sections of their fields. In a good harvest year, estimates are that they would get ten fold, that is, sow a bushel of seeds and get ten. A great harvest was fifteen fold.

But farming then and now was and is a risky business, always dependent on the weather. In a really bad year, not enough rain, a sirocco off the desert to the southeast, they might only get a three or fourfold harvest. (Start famine Powerpoint) Famines did occur when there was a bad harvest; people would starve. So during the summer every day, farmers check on their fields. And always there were parts of the fields doing poorly: birds eating seeds, plants getting scorched by the heat and drying up, plants growing but with bad

weather, weeds growing even more and taking over the fields. On those days and especially in a bad year, checking on the fields was an experience of despair. It is not infrequent that farmers stand at the corners of their fields and weep in despair. Jesus incorporates the detailed description of those failed fields into his parable. (Start PP of the classic poverty screen) Have you ever stood at the side of a field and prayed for rain? “What are we going to do? How are we going to get enough to eat? O God, please let it rain!” That was the every day experience of Jesus’ listeners.

And also today. The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) has warned that the El Nino weather cycle could cause severe drought in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 60 million people are facing a food crisis due to failed crops. The Pacific Ocean phenomenon has a global impact on weather patterns, which can cause heavy rains in some parts of the world and drought elsewhere. Climate change is a reality that will effect everyone with increasing intensity but especially the poor. So then and now, for farmers, often, worry, discouragement and despair.

But at the end of Jesus’ parable, he describes (start harvest PP) an incredible harvest: a hundred fold, sixty fold, thirty fold. A good harvest was tenfold, a great harvest was fifteen fold. Do you get it? Do you understand? A hundred fold was ten times more than a good harvest; even the least in Jesus’ list was twice a great harvest. What was he talking about? Not any harvest that ever happened for Galilean farmers. So people, listen. This incredible harvest is a description of the kingdom of God. The harvest of the Kingdom will be greater than anything you could even imagine. And in Jesus’ parables this kind of hyperbole is always a clue, like a bell. Bingo! Hyperbole! Kingdom of God! Hope in the midst of despair.

Message: those who sow seeds of the Kingdom will yield an incredible harvest. Don’t despair, sow seeds of the Kingdom in hope and confidence. God will yield a great harvest.

So what is the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching and in his actions? It is the government of God, the promise of a global government that includes all people. It is a government that will establish justice and peace for everyone. And Jesus was announcing all of the time, “the kingdom of God is at hand.” The hope for the future of God’s kingdom is close at hand, right around the corner. It was what he taught people to pray for: “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” And Jesus in his teachings and in his actions was making the Kingdom of God present, right now. As he said in his first sermon according to Luke, “the spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to those held captive in prison, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

What are then the marks, the policies, of the Kingdom of God? Not time for a full description, but to name a few that I would encourage you to think about in relation to governmental policies.

Jesus' ministry was a decisive sign of the Kingdom of God. All of the time he was extending health care and healing to those on the outside: the poor, lepers, women including a woman with a flow of blood. Yes, a characteristic mark of the Kingdom in Jesus' life and work was universal health care: no exclusions. And the most incredible thing was that this offer of the blessings of the Kingdom of God was extended not just to Israelites but also to Israel's enemies. As Jesus said to his hometown synagogue later in the story: "There were many widows in Israel...and many lepers ... the Gentiles like the widow of Zarepath and the Syrian general, Naaman. And the people of Nazareth, who assumed that the Kingdom of God was for them, when they heard this from Jesus were furious and wanted to kill him. But Jesus went on his way and did it. There are stories of Jesus healing the daughter of a Syrian woman, the servant of a Roman centurion, a deaf and dumb man on the other side of the borders of Israel. He was extending health care to everyone including those who didn't deserve it. Do you hear?

And speaking of health care, what about abortion? What teachings or parables do we have from Jesus about infanticide that was widely practiced in the ancient world? None; no teachings, no policy. Do you understand?

Another mark of the Kingdom implicit in these healing stories was the inclusion of all peoples regardless of their culture, genetic identity or ethnic or religious background. In the Kingdom of God, all people are welcome. Everybody was given the gifts of the Kingdom of God free. No exclusion. This vision of the Kingdom was the reason that the early Israelite followers of Jesus reached out to those of other ethnic groups, that is, the Gentiles. Jesus and Paul explicitly reached out to and included people from all racial and ethnic groups. Do you hear and understand?

And what about Jesus' teachings in relation to people of various sexual orientations, heterosexual and homosexual, that were widely accepted and practiced in the ancient world, particularly by the Gentile Greeks and Romans? None. United Methodist Church, do you understand? Is this an issue over which we as followers of Jesus should divide? What is the policy of the government of God as taught by Jesus? No position, silence. Do you understand?

A third mark of the Kingdom is non-violence and peace. The most striking thing about Jesus as Messiah is that he was not a warrior. He hurt no one, killed no one and taught his followers to love their enemies and to do good for those who hated and persecuted them. Jesus' proclamation was a future government of God in which everyone would live in peace.

Jesus was a great thinker. And a characteristic feature of his thought was to think back from the future. We generally think about the present from the perspective of the past. Our implicit assumption is that time moves from the past into the future. But Jesus thought back from the future and assumed that time moves from the future through the present into the past. The present is then to be seen in relation to the future Kingdom of God that is breaking into the present time. The coming of the Kingdom is the basis of hope. Furthermore, God's future is not a yearning, a wish. It is present now. That's what

Jesus was doing. And we can see and hear signs of God's government in the world if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. And we can invest in the Kingdom of God by persisting in doing good. As Paul said to the Galatians and as a prominent Methodist woman quoted him this past Wednesday, "Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

How we imagine the future has great influence on how we perceive and act in the present. Contemporary movie makers know that. Unfortunately most of the makers of films have a vision of the future that is in radical discontinuity with Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. They see the future as dominated by evil bad guys who can only be defeated by warfare and extreme violence. This is what can be called the myth of redemptive violence, the story that we can only be saved from the powers of evil by violence. The implication of this vision of the future is clear: get ready for war against the powers of evil. Get the biggest weapons you can and be ready to fight.

Jesus' vision of the future was radically different. He believed in and proclaimed a future in which the powers of evil will be conquered by the power of love, by the forces of justice and peace, by communication across boundaries. There is a memorable film that embodies a positive vision of thinking back from the future and of communication across insuperable boundaries. Here is the climactic scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in which a young man from earth enters the spaceship of visiting aliens and flies off with them in peace as a representative of the human race on earth.

I would recommend that everyone read a recent book by Steven Pinker called *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. In this study he documents from a wide variety of sources the steady decline in human violence during the last three thousand years. He is fiercely critical of religions and especially Christianity because of its history of religious violence. For example, one of the big spikes in violence in the past thousand years was the Wars of Religion between Protestants and Catholics in the period following the Reformation. In the period from 1559 until the Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in 1648, more than a third of the population of Europe was killed in the pursuit of religious fervor. But since then there has been a marked decline in violence especially in the period in which we live in the aftermath of World War II. We are learning as a human community and as a Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christian Church how to live in peace. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "We've come a long, long way but we've got a long, long way to go."

One dimension of this learning is directly related to Jesus' appeal in this parable to believe in the hope of the coming Kingdom of God. Psychologists have found that those who believe in a positive future are more able to postpone gratification. They call it myopic discounting. A sample test of myopic discounting was with children who were asked to choose between one marshmallow now or two marshmallows two weeks later. The children were tracked for a number of years. Those who had greater willpower and the ability to control their immediate impulses by choosing two marshmallows later were adolescents who were better adjusted, attained higher SAT scores, and stayed in school longer. And as adults they were less likely to use cocaine, had better relationships, were

better at handling stress, obtained higher degrees, and earned more money. Why? Because they had hope for the future and invested in that hope.

Jesus was appealing to the hope of the coming Kingdom of God. And the determining factor for the listeners to Jesus' parable and to Matthew's Gospel was related to how they heard the story. Those who heard this word of hope and didn't understand the parable ran a tape of disbelief in their heads: Nah, I don't believe all this pie in the sky stuff. Those ears don't even hear or pay attention to the word of the Kingdom of God. Those who heard the parable with joy but gave up on hope when things got tough, their faith amounted to nothing. They run a tape in their heads that goes, "This is too hard. Forget all this faith in God stuff." And those whose hearing was choked by worry about money and the stresses of the world yielded no fruit. They have an internal tape: "I can't wait for my reward. I want mine now." We all have those tapes that we can run as we hear. I have those tapes in my brain. I am learning how to recognize them but it is taking a lifetime. But those who hear, understand, believe and act on faith in the coming Kingdom of God yield incredible fruit, a hundred fold, sixty fold and thirty fold. It's all in how you hear.

Therefore, my friends, pay attention to your ears. What are your internal tapes that get activated when you listen to the parables of the Kingdom of God? Every week we tell the stories of God by heart here at Grace. But it takes three to grow and bear the fruit of the Gospel: the stories, the storytellers, and those who hear. The fruit of the Gospel depends on how you hear. So do you have ears to hear? Do you understand? Do your ears listen, understand and believe? Or do you discount this stuff, not really listen, and blow it off? How do you hear the parables of the government of God?

To paraphrase the song: Do your ears say "No?" Do they wobble to and fro? Do you tie hope in a knot or tie it in a bow? Do you give up on hope and throw it o'er your shoulder? Do your ears say "No?" As Jesus said, "Whoever has ears, let them hear!"