

## **Subversive Scribe –**

### **Bringing in Something Old and Something New**

*Gracious God, In may we see ourselves in the story you will for us. Through this meditation on your scriptures, mold us into a people who fearlessly cross conventional boundaries as Jesus did and instructed us to do. Amen.*

A few days ago, our nation was reminded of the brutal murder of a teenage boy, a black boy, who reportedly, looked at a white woman in an inappropriate or unwelcomed matter in a small Mississippi town.

Many black boys and men were lynched before and after that period, but this~ story, we remember in large part because of a mother's telling of a son's story to news outlets and her allowing an open-casket-viewing at his funeral. The story and the court trial caught national attention. All who saw the battered, twisted, grotesquely swollen face can never forget it.

I saw that face in Jet Magazine. We talked about the lynching in my high school religion class. I cannot remove the trauma of the image from my mind. His name was Emmett Till, 14 years old, ...I was 17.

The story impacted the self-understanding, thoughts, and actions of those of his generation then in high school and college. His mother's telling of the story and her efforts to have the nation be moved by the evil they could see with their own eyes had effect. Seeing the evil weed of racism running amok, she called for a national struggle to remove it. The courage and determination of Mamie Till Mobley – her activism gave rise to a questioning and soul examining. ...The Civil Rights Movement was an immediate response!

The story of the *lynched* ...begun to have a face. ...Old stories of normative conventional practices – now reexamined and criticized inspired new behaviors and new stories.

Stories are lenses through which we make sense of life. Let us focus on one set of stories. You may have noticed that since this past May, all our Sunday gospel stories have come from the writer Matthew. In the past three Sundays, just as today, Matthew has given us Jesus-parables.

The Jesus parables in the Matthew readings, are a lens through which we can see how the world is structured. We see what is wrong with certain structural and social arrangements and how they ought to be changed.

The Jesus-parables make a claim about how **God** sees a situation and of what God expects of us in response. Calls us to see, hear, understand, and to act. In contrasting opposites, setting up examples, and, often, exaggerating to the point of absurdity, the central issue of God's will and action are opened to us for viewing.

Through the parables we see that the Kingdom of God is fundamentally different from the kingdom of Rome – different from all such kingdoms of domination that continue down to this day.

If we look closely at each of the Matthew parables, **we find~** commonalities in the themes. These themes include conventional practices violated—sacred and conventional

boundaries broken: what ought **not** be gathered or mixed together... **is**~ gathered and mixed together, ...the **using**~ of what ought to have been **uprooted** or cast off **is**~, instead, left alone ... let to flourish, ...and **unsavory**~ characters are given a hero role, their **decisive action**~ held up as model behavior.

Let me, now, say more about the themes that emerge and then~ consider what response these themes call for from us.

In the **Sower** parable, boundaries are violated. The sower throws the seed indiscriminately both onto **good** ground and onto less promising~ ground, onto the walking path, into the thorn bushes, and onto rocky, hard ground. **Yet**, there is a grand~ harvest! *In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to Sower who throws out seed this way and that.*

In the **Weed** parable, instead of immediately removing the weed that the enemy planted, the master allows it to remain in the field – contrary to conventional, good farming practice. He instructs his workers to take on the near impossible task of separating and redeeming the good kernels from the bad. We are not told the result – only of the demand to do the near impossible. *In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to the effort of workers who must constantly struggle with evil intermingling, intertwining into the good of their effort.*

In the parable of the **Mustard Seed**, a farmer intentionally plants his field with mustard seed. Once taken root, a tenacious shrub, it is very difficult to weed out. Normally, when planted, it is planted in an isolated reserved, small

patch of ground. Curiously, the farmer covers his whole field with it. Mustard seed as a harvested crop has little value in the marketplace. His behavior runs counter to conventional logic. The tiny, puny seed is shown to have a great impact. *In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to mustard seed.*

In the parable of the **leaven**, we have a woman who creates yeast, that is, “leaven,” by taking morsels of stale bread, left to green-over with fungus for just~ the right~ amount of time. When she judges it to be ready, she takes a pinch of it to use as leaven. In the parable, she mixes a pinch into 40 pounds of flour. The resulting baked bread~ will be enough bread for a wedding feast! ...Such a small pinch has a big impact!

In her preparation of the yeast, if her spoiling mess of crumbs do not “spoil” enough, it is worthless~ ...as it wouldn’t cause the bread to rise. If she allows the spoiling crumbs to sit **too**~ long, the resulting **yeast** will be poisonous – will ruin the bread and sicken anyone who would eat it.

In Jewish culture, generally, yeast, that is, leaven, is considered a **corrupting** and **dangerous** substance. Yet, the use of leaven gives taste, smell, and texture to bread. Its use is normal. It causes substances to change. The leaven of Jesus’ gospel disturbed the, then, prevailing theologies and practices. *In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to yeast (leaven) mixed into flour.*

In the parable of the **treasure hidden in the field**, we have someone who discovers a hidden treasure in **someone else’s**

field. He doesn't report the finding, but, instead, buys~ the field. In most of our estimations, this is unsavory behavior! Besides, the treasure could well~ be ... stolen property.

*In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to hidden treasure that is found and acquired. A finding! A discovery! Not something owed to one, based on one's personal merit.*

In the parable of the **merchant**, the character, who in Jewish culture is considered to be *anything but honest*, finds~ in his trading and dealings that someone has a pearl of great value, that person, having no idea of its true value. ...But, the merchant does! ...Perhaps this is the one exquisite pearl he has been searching for his whole life-long! He sells all he owns and buys the pearl! ...Living under the reign of God, involves throwing all prudence and caution to the wind, and in single-minded devotion, taking immediate action.

*In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a pearl that brings a merchant to sell all he has of lesser~ value to obtain what he judges to be of the greatest~ value.*

Lastly, we have the parable of the **dragnet**. The dragnet, cast indiscriminately into the sea from the shoreline or a boat, gathers in whatever fish may be in the immediate area – all sorts of fish. Some are deemed good~ fish, some deemed bad. Some kept. Some cast off. Boundaries~ are not observed. All~ are gathered in, only to be sorted later.

*In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a dragnet.*

Taking these parables as a unit, we ask, what response are they asking of us? In our hearing of them, the parables presume our active participation and understanding. That

our understanding shall result~ in words and deeds in line~ with the message given to us.

The Matthew parables of the past few Sundays, call us to cross boundaries – to gather and to mix in new ways, ...to question our normative understandings of what corrupts, ...to question **whether** conventional understanding given from the **Old~** of religious interpretations and conventional religiosity, **whether~**, **whether~** it **really** conforms with the **New** of the teachings of Jesus.

We are challenged to seek the pearl of great value, letting go of past holdings so that we can have the **New~** of greater value.

We are challenged to cast our net widely in the ways we explore what God may have in store for us. ...**Drawing~** from Hebrew scripture and the life and teachings of Jesus as the “**Old~**,” in the here and now, we are called to bring forth the “**New~**,” with understanding – **interpreting** and **applying** the parables to **our~** time and place.

We are invited to engage in conversation among ourselves and with others and to study our scripture and scripture commentaries. In this way, we open ourselves to scrutinize, critique, and if need be, **change** our understandings of traditional beliefs and behaviors **in light of** the life and teachings of Jesus.

At the end of this gospel reading, Matthew tells us, **we~**, as followers of Jesus trained for the Kingdom of Heaven, as **wise scribes**, are to bring out of our treasure **both~** what

is **new** and~ what is **old**. ...Both new~ and old~ in the service of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the Good News!      **Amen!**

**\*Hymn of Response** *In Christ There Is No East or West*

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**Resources used:**

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