

1) *Have you understood all this? Yesss!* I seriously doubt it, don't you!

But can you really blame the poor disciples?

If Jesus had only paid attention in his freshman Rhetoric and Composition class, he would know that when you mix too many metaphors, what you get is mush; that when you keep pelting people with image after image, what they end with isn't insight, but a sight for sore eyes.

Have you understood all this?

The answer Jesus gets sounds to me like a plea from listeners in sensory overload:

Yes, whatever, alright already, now can we please STOP!

- The disciples have had plenty of warning as to what they would be in for. This is the 3rd teaching tear on which Jesus takes off in Matthew's Gospel.
 - The first one is the Sermon on the Mount:
 - Curious words about folks who are obviously cursed being divinely blessed
 - Odd commands to go the 2nd mile and turn the other cheek
 - "Not to worry!" promises about anxiety over food and clothes (since God clothes lilies and God feeds birds).
 - Jesus goes on his second teaching tear as he dispatches those disciples on a teaching/healing mission:
 - Take next to nothing for provision or protection
 - Ask for food and shelter from the folks you go to help
- So now when Jesus climbs in a boat to address crowds on the shore, I can just see the disciples rolling their eyes: *Here he goes again.*

2) After centuries of retelling, these words remain a bit much, don't they?

Here's what we've heard from Mathew's Jesus for three weeks now:

- Two weeks ago: about a failed crop planting strategy:
 - seed scattered every which way on all kinds of ground—none of it prepared.
 - But there's a huge harvest anyway:
 - from what good ground seeds do fall on,
 - a far greater yield than any farmer in that day could ever dream of.
- Last week we heard about a curious crop weeding strategy:
 - standing back and letting roots of wheat get tangled with roots of weeds—
 - weeds that (as Robin told us) are not only a nuisance—but poisonous.
 - But, no worries! The "reaping," Jesus (or Matthew) later says, will be done by angels.
- And today, piling puzzle upon puzzle, the Kingdom of Heaven, is like (Fasten your seat belts!):
 - A different kind of weed seed (think dandelion or kudzu.)
 - But, hey, the mustard weed does grow into bushes big enough for birds.
 - The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast.
 - (Think *mold* or *rust*—yeast carried connotations of corruption)
 - But kneaded into fifty pounds of flour by one strong baker woman,
 - that "corruption" generates one hundred loaves of bread.
 - The Kingdom of Heaven is like a lucky guy who stumbles on a treasure in a field; hides it; then buys the field, presumably without disclosing his fortunate find to the previous owner.

- The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a merchant who finds just the pearl he's looking for—not by dumb luck, but by patience and skill--presumably by trading on the open market. (Did you notice that both buyers sell all they have for what they get? Let's hope their Heavenly Father, who clothes the flowers and feeds the birds, will do the same for them, since both now have no money left for either.)
- The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net fishing trip—scooping up whatever's in the water; sorting nothing out until the very end. But scribes for the Kingdom dive deep into a household treasure trove, and continually sort through what they come out with—not (as in net fishing) by keeping the good and tossing the bad, but by constantly reframing and reintegrating what is new and what is old.

3) Have you understood all this? Good for you! Can we talk?

Courtesy of this parable barrage, the Kingdom of Heaven sounds like the Ultimate Enigma. "Enigma," in fact, is one good way to translate the word "parable".

And nestled amongst these disorienting verbal fireworks

are words of Jesus (or Matthew) to the effect that he's being enigmatic on purpose—taking what folks thought was perfectly clear, and rendering it dumbfounding.

So, what do these parables "mean"?

They sure aren't Aesop's Fables with neat and tidy morals.

But they aren't Rorschach ink blots either.

4) The vestry played with these parables at their meeting on Wednesday evening.

Listen to what they came up with:

- 1st: Too many metaphors?—Well, the fact is, there's something here for everyone. Whatever your life role and circumstances, there's probably a parable here with your name on it—targeted to drive you crazy toward the Kingdom of Heaven
- 2nd: The Kingdom of Heaven is so urgently important, that sometimes it's best described in ways that just sound silly—in exaggerated, cartoons that first make you giggle, and then make you stop and think.
- 3rd: The Kingdom is not described by anything grand, impressive, awesome, overpowering but in ordinary, earthy stuff—seeds, weeds, bushes, birds, farming, fishing, baking, treasure hunting
The Realm, the Commonwealth of God is evidenced in odd ways, some of which are, frankly, morally a bit muddy.
- 4th & most important:
The Kingdom of Heaven involves our taking what we never could make up, and making something out of it.
All that we have is gift from God, gift given freely, offered to all; and God says: *Do what you can to use it wisely and well.*
Just don't try to borrow irresponsibly and endlessly on The Bank of Infinity.

5) Powerful stuff! Are your vestry members good theologians or what?

Like my colleagues, here, for me, is the bottom line:

The Kingdom, Realm, Commonwealth of Heaven

runs on a mysterious interplay of human grit and divine grace.

It takes muscle, ingenuity, patience; it requires careful discernment and hard choices. And when these are in short supply (as they almost always are in one way or another), the Kingdom of Heaven that is always over and under and all around our efforts— finds surreptitious ways of working into and through those efforts— no matter how strong or weak, smart or stupid, righteous or sinful our efforts may be. The Kingdom of Heaven provides no easy exits, quick fixes, backups, or cover ups; it just keeps on coming to meet us right in the midst of wherever we are.

6) This is starting to sound abstract; let's story it instead:

What we heard today in the saga from Genesis

gives fresh meaning to the phrase “dysfunctional family”

- Jacob works seven years for the girl of his dreams.

He wakes up the morning after his wedding to find he's married her sister

(How could this happen? Perhaps he's been dreaming too much.)

His uncle tells him to keep up appearances for the seven day wedding celebration and then he can have the sister he wants—

as long as he knows he's not getting two for the price of one,

since he'll have to work seven more years for his second wife.

Jacob has been cheated by uncle—just like he has cheated his brother,

and like he will cheat his uncle again over the next several years.

- (If you are feeling too cheerful today, go home and read Gen 25-33.

Long before the end, you'll be suitably depressed)

For me, here is the most poignant piece:

Two wives, desperate to be loved, locked in a bitter baby making competition:

If I can just give my husband more children than she does, maybe he will love me.

- God is apparently absent from this whole sordid, tragic narrative—

but, the storyteller shows us God on both ends, appearing and getting through to Jacob

- On the run from brother whom he's cheated, Jacob has a dream of a Ladder of angels, bringing earth to heaven, and heaven to earth.

And he hears the voice of God say clearly:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,

for I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.

- I'm guessing he forgets this dream, as he becomes obsessed with the dream of cheating the uncle who has cheated him.

After getting rich from his clever cheating schemes,

Jacob leaves his uncle to go back home; only to get the bad news

that his brother whom he cheated long ago is bearing down on him.

At Jabbok brook, God wrestles with him all night.

Jacob holds his own, and saying, at last: *I won't let you go till you bless me.*

God gives Jacob both a permanent limp, and a name changing blessing:

from Jacob: “trickster;” to Israel; “one who must wrestle with God.”

The next scene is two brothers, who might have killed each other,

weeping for sorrow and for joy, each giving the other the kiss of reconciliation.

7) This whole scenario seems far-fetched.

But then some might say the same of the one that has unfolded in Washington, DC this week

- The national debt climbs higher as gap between rich and poor gets wider,
- Our economic structures make it increasingly easier for rich and harder for the poor.

- Our vision of society gets progressively less focused on communal responsibility and more fixated on individual entitlement.
- A mix of pride, position, principle, ideology and special interest drive those we sent to Congress, to tie each other to the track as the train bears down on the nation and the world.

Where has God been, where will God be in all of this?

If these parables and this story tell us anything:

- Not in a \$15 trillion check from the Bank of Heaven, deposited at 11:59 on Aug 1
- Not in the kind of arm twisting, horse trading, lobbying or PR blitzing that characterize politics as usual.
- Not by neutralizing either the patterns or the consequences of dysfunction.

Our nation has paid dearly for a very long time,
and will continue to do so under the best case scenario.

Nevertheless, Paul tells us, that in all things God works for good
with those who love and listen for God

And if that is so, then nothing can separate us from the love of God:

Not life, not death, things present, or things to come, ideologies or angels, rulers or powers
This is politics most unusual.

Have we understood all this?