

Lectio Divina: 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)
11 July 2020
Baltimore Carmel
Bryan N. Massingale

This weekend's gospel offers an abundance of riches, like an all-you-can-eat buffet with tempting delights at every turn. How to get a handle on this lengthy and complex gospel?

Let's first situate it in its larger setting. Chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel is a collection of various parables or stories that Jesus tells to describe some of the characteristics or features of his key proclamation: The Reign of God (called the "Kingdom of Heaven" by Matthew, given his Jewish audience's sensitivities over using the divine name). Scholarship is unanimous in relating that Jesus' principal message was this: "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" This gives us a first place to look for understanding today's gospel.

The Reign of God is not a place, nor is it shorthand for the afterlife or a reward for a life well-lived. Rather, the Reign of God describes how life will be when God's will is fully realized for humankind. Thus some scholars prefer to speak of the *Dream* of God, or the *Vision* of God. The Reign of God is God's vision for humankind. It describes a state of *shalom*: a word we translate as "peace," but its meaning is far richer. *Shalom* is a state of wholeness and well-being, where no one lacks for essential needs, where all have what they need for full and abundant life (Brueggemann). *Shalom* is a world where all have what they need to live fully dignified lives as befit those created in God's

image, a world where creation and creatures exist in harmony and non-exploitative relationships. That's the Reign of God.

The fundamental message of Jesus is that God's Vision is now being realized in his deeds and words. The Reign of God is at hand. It is a vision so overwhelming, so amazing, so staggeringly breath-taking that it can only be described in parables, images, similes and stories, not doctrines and propositions. Thus for the next few weeks, we will hear gospels beginning with, "The Reign of God – the Kingdom of heaven – is like"

With that background, we approach today's gospel and notice that it falls into three divisions, nicely outlined on the *Lectio* card: the parable itself; an explanation of why Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables; and then an explanation of the parable that is given privately to the disciples. Here lies a first challenge for us: most homilies and catechesis on this gospel gravitate toward the final section. After all, it promises to tell us what the story means.

Here we find an allegorical interpretation given to the various types of soil on which the seed – taken to be the word of God or the message of the gospel – happens to fall. The emphasis is on the reception that Jesus' message receives from various groups of people. Thus, if you're like me, in your youth group or spiritual retreats, you've been asked to ponder: "What kind of soil are you?" Are you the rocky ground that the gospel cannot penetrate? Or the shallow soil – which, of course, was the most popular answer since no one is completely faithful, and honesty forbade us from claiming to be the good

soil. But at least we could take credit for not being the roadway and letting our seeds be swallowed by birds – unlike those who weren't even in church or youth group to ponder this story.

Why is this a challenge? Because such allegorization focuses upon *us* and on our reception of the word. We become the center of attention, whereas the point of the parables was to illustrate characteristics of the Reign or Vision of God. Scholars point out that this allegorization of the parables is a later development in the composition of the gospels. In fact, the earliest versions of this parable circulated without any reference to this interpretation. It is clear that it was added at a later stage of the gospel's development. (Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 79)

To use technical scholarly jargon (allowing my theological geek to come out), the interpretation stems from and reflects the *Sitz im Leben Kirche*, that is, the life situation of Matthew's faith community. This band of Jesus' later followers provided an interpretation of this remembered lesson from Jesus to explain what was happening in their faith community. Scholars relate that most likely, Matthew was writing to or from a community under siege or persecution, who needed to explain why so many abandoned the practice of the faith in response to danger and the allure of social rewards for abandoning the faith. The allegorical interpretation thus also functioned to encourage others to remain faithful so as to inherit an abundant reward.

Thus commentators, exegetes and scholars are in near unanimous agreement that the original core of today's gospel – the part that stems from the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, or the life situation at the time of Jesus – is the first part, the unvarnished story itself. Here we can discover what Jesus is trying to relate about the Vision of God.

The parable is deceptively simple, and is an authentic depiction of agricultural practices in first century Palestine. It begins, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." It would be like telling a story that begins, "A Carmelite, a Franciscan, and a Dominican were sitting at a bar" The very form tips you off that you are being set up; the intervening details are only as important as they set you up for the punch line of the joke's conclusion. Something very similar is at work here. The details of the seeds' growth, or lack thereof, are important only as they bring the parable's conclusion into stark relief or contrast.

Jesus' hearers would be familiar with the life setting. First century Palestinian sowers did not plough or prepare the ground before planting or sowing the seeds. (No mechanized tractors or old-fashioned hoes to till the soil). Thus everyone knew that there would be a certain amount of waste. Everyone knew of the obstacles to a successful harvest: the birds absconding with the seed; the shallow ground unable to sustain a proper crop; the thick thorns that choked the fledgling plants. In light of this, the hearers knew what to expect. A seven-fold yield or harvest was considered average or typical; it was what you could expect given all the obstacles and harsh realities. A

ten-fold yield was considered really good and a cause for celebration, according to Jeremias and Perrin and others.

The narrative then turns upon an amazing contrast, that is, the contrast between the present obstacles and the awesome fulfillment. The punch line of the story lies in the over-the-top harvest. This is what was truly astonishing for the original hearers: a harvest that is 30-fold (amazing!), 60-fold (astounding!), 100-fold (breath-taking!). Jesus's hearers would have heard the story in amazement. No farmer or sower would ever dare hope for such an outcome from their farming practices. Jesus's conclusion was so over the top so as to be outrageous. And, therefore, memorable!

The kingdom of heaven – God's Vision – is like a sower who acts, knowing all of the obstacles to the vision yet confident and assured of its future abundant realization. Because of this confidence and assurance, the sower acts now to help realize its fulfillment. The vision's future realization "grounds" confident action in the present, despite the knowledge of the very real obstacles that exist.

Is the Reign of God like the sower? Or, like the harvest successful beyond all expectation? Jesus, being the Eastern wisdom teacher and sage story-teller that he is, would likely answer: "Both." The Sower acts only because of the assurance of the abundant outcome. The Sower, and the Giver of the vision, in a sense act as one. They "co-create" the amazing outcome. The abundant harvest is possible only because of the present act of the Sower. The Sower acts confidently only because of the assurance that

these acts are not in vain. Present and future co-exist. The Sower acts in a “future present” tense. (I know there is no such verb tense, but God’s actions exceed the limitations of our language). Because of the Sower’s actions, the future is already in-breaking into the present. In a sense, time is flowing “backward.”

There is a paradox here, where present and future blend together. To understand the parable, and God’s Vision, we have to give up a linear concept of time, where the present is the prelude to the future or the future flows out of the present. Norman Perrin puts it well: “. . . we must use the words ‘present’ and ‘future’, but let us be careful that the emphasis isn’t temporal, but experiential.” He continues: “In the teaching of Jesus the emphasis is not upon a future for which we must prepare, even with the help of God; the emphasis is upon a present which carries with it the guarantee of the future. The present that has become God’s present guarantees that all futures will be God’s future.” (Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 204-205).

The parable asks that we become seized – possessed – by the lure of God’s future. We are no longer defined or limited by the present, whatever its chocking thorns or scorching sun. We are defined by the abundant harvest to come. Drawn by the lure of an irresistible beckoning future – God’s just future of abundance, of *shalom*, of extravagant welcome for all – we act now in light of God’s future, to bring about that future, which cannot but happen.

I believe that it is not accidental or only a coincidence that I was invited to reflect upon this parable. As some of you may know, I have spent my life dealing with racial justice in the light of faith. The past six weeks have been consumed with writing and speaking about the tragic reality of unjust killing and the uprising of racial protests against our enduring national sins of racial injustice and white systemic benefit. Over and over, I have been asked: “Do you think things will be different now?” “Where’s the hope?” “Are you hopeful?”

These are really tough questions. History does not provide much ground for optimism. To be blunt, we’ve been here before. There have been past moments of racial awakening – with the Reconstruction after the Civil War, with the Civil Rights Acts after the horrors in Birmingham and Selma, with the Kerner Commission’s report in 1968 stating that white racism was the decisive reason for the racial unrest and rebellions of the summers of ‘67 and ‘68 – there have been moments of awakening and reckoning only to be followed by backlash, resistance, regression, and impasse when the price of justice, when the cost of giving up unjust preferment and entitlement, proved too much for the white majority to bear.

We’ve been here before, with the same analyses, the same recommendations, the same eventual retrenchment. It is tempting, and understandable, to look at the circling birds, the stony ground, the thorny soil, the scorching heat of racial resentments,

fears, and resistance, and truly wonder – even despair – about the possibility of something truly new, of an abundant harvest of *shalom*.

This parable gives us another way of approaching the question of hope, with its call to act now with confident assurance in God’s vision. The parable does not ask for a suspension of reality; the parable frankly acknowledges the obstacles to the Vision’s realization. The parable, however, states that the Sower acts now as the co-creator of God’s just future of abundant *shalom*. Present and future work together to bring about something NEW. Present and future flowing together provide a basis for hope.

The African American womanist theologian, Kelly Brown Douglas, recently gave a beautiful expression of this parabolic hope. She speaks of God’s future and our present responsibilities (both personal and ecclesial) this way:

“. . . faith communities are the only communities that by definition have no accountability to the present; rather their accountability is to God’s just future. And so, it is the task of faith communities to lead the way toward that future. . . . This understanding provides the foundation and motivation for the work that I am doing now: partnering with God to build a just future where all persons are treated and respected as the sacred children of God that they are . . .” (*Sojourners*, July 2020)

Douglas’s mission statement is grounded in the nature of the God whom Jesus spoke of and proclaimed. Jesus’s confident assurance in the Dream’s fulfillment stems from who his “Abba” is: **YHWH** – the enigmatic, four-lettered, unpronounceable Divine

name that many Jewish authors translate as: “I cause to be what will become.” “I call into existence the things that do not exist.” (Brueggemann).

I believe, then, that we are called to be co-creators with God to bring about a more just world that is God’s Vision. We become so whenever, like the Sower, we respond to the lure of the future with the declaration: “Now I am co-creating tomorrow.” In this we become not only prophets of hope, but its very agents.

We are drawn by the irresistible lure of an unimaginable yet trustworthy future, acting even *now* because of what *will be*, acting now to create what will be. [Just as Jesus acted by hosting meals of scandalously outrageous inclusive hospitality and table fellowship, meals that mirrored the abundant welcome of God’s Vision for humankind.] We, like the Sower, with revolutionary patience and assured boldness, perform what is to come right now, confident in the Dream’s abundant fulfillment and realization.

The reign of God is like a Sower sowing seed, acting now in light of what will be, acting now to bring about tomorrow’s harvest of *shalom*, acting now out of an overwhelming confidence in God’s fulfilling the Dream and Vision. That is our hope.