

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 2014
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church Mt. Airy

Last week, we began reading a portion of Matthew's Gospel that tells of Jesus teaching the increasingly large crowds that appear wherever he goes using parables. Today, and for the next few weeks, we will continue to hear what Jesus has to say to his followers, both the stories he tells publicly, and the interpretations of the stories he offers to his inner circle alone.

The stories, the parables themselves, are rich in image, symbol and meaning – so rich that they seem to speak anew to each generation of Jesus' followers, and may even unfold new meanings to us each time we hear them.

We expect that of parables. As I said last Sunday, the word “parable” simply means a comparison – a story that begins “A is like B,” but we tend to use the word parable only for stories that are richly symbolic, rather than simple tales with one clear meaning.

And that is one reason why the interpretations of the parables that Matthew presents Jesus giving to the disciples are the most difficult parts of the stories. The parables themselves spin out meaning almost infinitely, interacting with our own experiences and understandings to continually generate new insights, while the

interpretations try to pin these very rich stories down to a single meaning among the many.

Another thing that is troubling about these interpretations is that they are offered in private. Secret knowledge, available only to insiders, doesn't seem at all consistent with the reign of God that the parables describe, or with the Christian community to which we are called.

So, if you find yourself bothered by the interpretation part of today's Gospel reading, with the furnace of fire and the weeping and gnashing of teeth, you are not alone. And indeed, many biblical scholars, and not just members of the Jesus Seminar, think that the interpretations of the parables are more likely to be editorial insertions than authentic words of Jesus, put in to speak directly to the concerns of Matthew's own community in his own day.

If that is so, Matthew's community must have been very concerned with what to do about disagreement and discord in their midst, and there must have been some among them who were agitating for a purge of those who were disruptive, or whose lives were not exemplary. While we hear of condemnation at the last day in the interpretation, we also hear the imperative to live together with those with whom we disagree, and let God do the sorting. Which might be worth remembering in our increasingly divided and polarized world.

But I'd like to take a step further back, and think for a minute about the parables in a more basic way. Jesus' parables, his comparisons are almost always comparing simple, familiar things to something variously called the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, or the reign of God. It would help to understand the stories if we knew what Jesus meant by those expressions.

“Kingdom” is a bit of a tough word for us. Not only have we thrown off kingship as inconsistent with our God-given, unalienable rights, we have, in our common usage, narrowed the meaning of “kingdom” to the merely geographical – a kingdom is, for us, a place, and the kingdom of God is thus, the place where God rules, which is obviously not here and now. When you throw in “heaven,” our thoughts become even more locational and other-worldly – heaven is a transcendently distant place.

But kingdom has another meaning, a functional, rather than geographical or political one. “Kingdom” can mean “kingship.” The kingdom of God can, and I think properly does, really mean the time and place when the world is ordered according to God's purpose. The reign of God, in that understanding of the phrase, is not the place we aspire to go after we die, but the community we are called to build while we live, the community of God.

The reign of God, then, is not our destination; it is our goal, our plan of action, the blueprint for our life in community.

And see what richness the parables have for us when we read them in this light.

The community of God – our community – is like a sower who spread the seed of the Word of God widely, and while the Word didn't always produce the results we looked for, still the community grew and the Word continued to spread.

Our community, to borrow next Sunday's parable, is like a mustard seed. We started small but grew and grew until we could shelter and nurture a surprisingly large number.

Our community is like a man who threw a banquet, and when the guests we expected didn't show up, we went out and invited everyone we could find, because unbridled hospitality and welcoming the stranger are signs that we are living in the reign of God.

Our community is like a man who had two sons, one of whom stayed and one of whom went away – we honor the faithful, and we rejoice at the return of the prodigal.

And our community is like a someone who tends the field that is the world, and spreads the word of God, and when someone spreads lies and discord among us (the word Jesus uses that is translated as "devil" in today's parable literally means

“slanderer”), instead of isolating ourselves and uprooting the Word, we choose to live together with those with whom we disagree, confident that the truth spoken in love will overcome slander and hate, and that with God, all things are possible, even the reconciliation of enemies.

The reign of God is very near indeed, but it does not become nearer when we isolate ourselves from those with whom we disagree, or ostracize them from our community in order to somehow perfect it. Indeed, Jesus makes it perfectly clear that our community will not be perfected, that the reign of God will not be accomplished, until everyone is reconciled with God – our enemies and those who have wronged us, and those whom we have wronged along with our families, friends and neighbors.

Because the last parable, the one we are called to spend all our days working to make real, is the simplest one. In the end, we should be able to say, “The reign of God is like us.”

Amen.