

Faith and Imagination

Matthew 13: 31-33

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Prayer: We seek your will, O God: to know what is so valuable in life that it is worth all we have and all we are. Grant us discernment to see you at work for good even when events around us seem wrong or even evil. Nourish us in your covenant, and set our hearts free to rejoice in Christ's leading...

The gospel accounts of Jesus teaching ministry count fifty-five major parables, and several dozen more minor parables. What you will be hearing are Jesus' parables – images many of them from everyday life experience.

I know that this series was not planned for my benefit or with my input, but with the focus on trust and imagination, this is a good way to begin the Interim journey.

Sometimes when we are working with Paul's writings, I find myself needing to explain things about Greek philosophy or the laws of the Torah, or to offer insight from translation in the Old Testament. No such challenges with the parables. In the parables Jesus draws our attention to areas of life that are easily overlooked, which makes the parables function a little like poetry or extended metaphors. And you might need to sit down, take a moment to settle your thoughts and get comfortable, and let Jesus' story take you where it does – intuitively. These are stories that you don't need any special training to understand. You need a moment to rest and reflect on your life experience – you might already know what you need to know. Jesus invites us to hold up what we know in a different light – the light of faith and imagination.

We will not be getting through all of his parables– that would take us about a year and a half. In this season of preparation for Easter, we are going to hit some of the highlights in the parables, and you will be invited to think creatively – imaginatively – about faith, both in your personal life, as well as for the church.

I do not think I am speaking out of turn if I say that when I interviewed with the Interim Search Committee, one of my questions for them was "what do you want out of the interim season here at FCWH?" There was a moment of kind of awkward, embarrassed silence... "Actually, we don't really want an "Interim season"; we just want to get as quickly as possible to the next settled Pastor." ...no offense...

Honesty! I can work with honesty! And I am not here to slow you down, *au contraire!*

Let me ask that a different way: Are there things that you are aware of that could be done now to set up the congregation to be successful in its future ministries? Your next settled Pastor will not be Geordie Campbell, and I can't tell you how much I respect his ministry. You want to call your next Pastor to be a good fit for the ministry you see in your future, not your past. You don't want that person to be blamed simply for not being Geordie. ... "Oh" ...so then we began to have an interesting, exploratory and imaginative conversation about some of the things we might do to strengthen the congregation and re-focus your vision for ministry in the years ahead. This is an excellent use of this season in between... good interim process will allow all of us to know together what we are looking for in the future, the skills important for a leader for that time, and we will know our own place of partnership in that future ministry. And...it will save you time, money and the potential very high cost of calling someone inappropriately.

Think of it, like... a mustard seed! Jesus metaphor is one of growth, the flower and full grown shrub is a *natural* outcome to a viable seed of faith. We can't jump from the seed to the flower because we are nervous or anxious, it takes all spring for the plant to grow, and then, especially with the care of the farmer, the flower comes. And Jesus adds this comment "...it is the greatest of shrubs...so that the birds ... come and make nests in its branches." It's a habitat! Where birds are there are insects, pollinators and new life! In the fall the birds eat the seeds and they fly around and new plants are sown... But it is still winter today, and I am getting ahead of myself.

I'm the new one here today... and I wonder what a church would be like that is a strong habitat for faith to grow in? I wonder how much diversity of faith and faith experience would be held and nurtured there in its branches? (I mean nurtured in the building...extended from the building...it's not about the building.)

At a personal level, what seeds are ready to begin growing in your life? How are you nurturing the growing life of faith around you? Are you extending your branches for others?

This series of parables has to do with small, inconsequential things. Or are they? What is small and what is large in your life? Have you ever had the feeling you've been putting too much emphasis on one area, and not enough on another? This is for you...in this season of Lent we'll be reconsidering what we know. We'll imagine things differently; we'll seek God's leading.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. Later in this chapter Jesus offers more parables, in case you begin to take the Kingdom of God too literally...The kingdom of God is also like a treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls... The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea...

In the last weeks I have been visiting and doing some reading about churches which are in busy downtown areas, like this one, and paying attention to how they engage the community they are in. There are a number of strategies they use to be a place of hospitality. Some of the effective strategies I've noticed include:

- spaces for individual prayer are available, often in outside space
- regular tours are offered by someone with a passion for local history,
- the lives of famous members or events are lifted and marked appropriately.
- And there's provision for the tourist to mark their presence in that place in some meaningful or creative way at the site.

The most effective, give tourists the opportunity to go beyond just a tour and a place for a selfie – to deepen their visit into a spiritual pilgrimage – something that will change their life and give them a new perspective when they get back home. I'm imagining... something like a spiritual habitat that cultivates connection and meaning.

What do you know about faith? What connections can you imagine?

- What can this congregation offer the #metoo or #churchtoo movement?
- What do you know, here at the center of this community, about those on its margins?
- With the stock market in "free fall" this week, how can we speak to genuine wealth? The things worth having? Jesus challenge of "where your treasure is..."
- With fear about a world pandemic, what do you know about health, the health of the body?
- How do your own words – and your silences – convey faith? Shelter others in faith, and nurture growth with a potential for flowering?

The parables help us to build capacity for these questions with faith and imagination. The mustard seed is a small seed. Likewise, I'll give you a couple of my own small, parables of the kingdom of heaven:

This week at the Peabody museum in New Haven they took down the 65-foot-long Brontosaurus which has been there since the place opened. Over the years, science has learned that Brontosaurus was not who they thought it was, it includes far more animals in a large family including Apatosaurus. They'll take it down and work on it, correct some previous misconceptions about how it was assembled, and put it back up in a "more scientifically accurate pose" to be unveiled in 2023. Is faith like that? Learning something, sharing and celebrating it, and then learning more and changing?

What about a church that had a Pastor who had a wonderful healing ministry for 15 years...and then left? Retired after serving long and well. What happens in that space afterwards, as choices are made? As people feel the tug of fear and the leading of faith?

I'd like to hear your parables of what it means to maintain faith, to grow and nurture faith. Jesus' imagination included the mustard seed and the yeast that spread through all the dough...

What small things have you noticed, as God's realm grows around us?

What are your hopes?

Maybe you thought the kingdom of God was about judgment – separating the sheep from the goats. It's also about a mustard seed, starting small and becoming a host to a modest, but splendid, critical part of the biosphere.

Maybe you thought the kingdom of God was about punishment: keeping the good fish and throwing the others away from the one net which brought up both together. It's also about divine justice: separating the wheat from the weeds. Finding something of genuine worth, like a treasure in a field, or a pearl of great value. Each of you are valuable in God's eyes; yet real value eludes us every day. We forget our own value, to focus on the important as well as the urgent, we forget the deeper purpose available to us.

Maybe you thought the kingdom of God was about what comes after this life, what is promised for those who have gone before us. It's also about the way you live life in the every day.

What do you hope the Kingdom of heaven is like? And how will you shape your life – sorting out your own resource, using your energy – to take the next steps in faith?

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