

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin
Sunday, July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

My husband would probably be the first one to tell you, I do not have a positive history with plants. In the time that we have been together, about once a year I get the idea that I am going to acquire and take care of a plant, and it does okay for a while, and then somehow it dies. The somehow is usually because I have forgotten to water it. I get distracted with other things in life, and so the plant becomes dry and lifeless. But in the pandemic, I have surprisingly been able to keep some pots of flowers alive, along with a pepper plant in our back yard. Turns out, I just have to water them, and the fact that I have not had to be somewhere other my house every day has given me the brain space to remember to water them.

Despite my historic ineptitude with plants, I think I know enough to know that seeds on rocky ground or among thorns will probably not result in a thriving plant life. It seems obvious in this parable that these seeds cannot result in a bountiful crop – they have nothing to nourish them and help them to grow. And yet in Jesus’s explanation of the parable, if we assume that the seeds are people, it seems that it is the fault of the seeds that they do not grow. They did not let the gospel take root, and were lured into other things like worry and wealth. But how could we expect them to grow if they do not have proper soil?

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This is one of the tricky things about the parables. They are not always the perfect allegories that we want them to be. In the section of Matthew 13 that the lectionary leaves out, Jesus tells the disciples that they have been given the secret, or mystery, to the kingdom of heaven. This mystery, according to New Testament scholar A.J. Levine, does not indicate the “need of a special key to unlock a singular meaning. What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge.”

When I read this parable, the questions I ask myself are, what prevents me from understanding the gospel? What is it that taints the soil that I am trying to grow in? Given that in this passage, Matthew also references Isaiah in his explanation, we might interpret the word “understand” as it would have been heard in the Hebrew Scriptures, which is not just understanding as intellectual knowledge, but understanding as acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty. With this meaning in mind, a better question might be, what is it that prevents me from living as though Christ is sovereign?

When I was in the third grade, at Verner Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, all of the students began attending Language Arts and Math classes based on ability. This meant that for those subjects, I left homeroom, where we still had science, social studies, art and music all together, to have those subjects with other students who tested at the same ability as I did. It was then that I began to notice that in the classes based on “ability,” I was surrounded primarily by other white students. As I entered middle school, this phenomenon only increased. All of my subjects, with the exception of P.E. and extracurricular classes, were based on performance level. My interactions with Black students primarily took place in the locker rooms during P.E. Even at lunch, we were assigned to sit with the class that we went to lunch with, which inevitably led to white students at certain tables, and black students at others. For all practical purposes, my middle school was still a segregated institution, with white students and black student being in the same building, but not interacting in any meaningful way.

As pre-teen and then a teenager, I had no reason to think too deeply about this, because it was never something that anyone really addressed. The separation was there, clear as day, but we never talked about the why: why school was set up like this, and why white and black students ended up in different classrooms. Left to my own assumptions, I took this to mean that there must be something fundamentally different between myself and my black peers; the fact that I primarily saw other white faces in my classes, led me to believe that black people simply were not as smart as white people. I saw that it was primarily black students who were served with suspensions and expulsions, and assumed there was a behavioral inferiority to blame.

The ideas that I held were racist. And they were what I absorbed without ever being explicitly taught racism. This was the implicit ethos of the world that I lived in, and that we all live in. It was not until many years later that I learned about the ways in which systemic racism in housing, education, wealth building, healthcare, and policing created the separation I saw before me, and had nothing to do with inherent differences in people. But even as I have begun to unlearn my own racism, I am reminded every day that this unlearning, this removal of the weeds in the garden, is not a one and done deal. It is something I must continually work at, or else my understanding of the gospel will be choked and not bear fruit.

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In the eight minutes and forty-six seconds it took for Derek Chauvin to kill George Floyd with his knee on his neck, George continually cried out that he could not breathe, and in desperation called out the name of his mother. We have all either witnessed this video, or have heard the descriptions of this murder. And I, like I'm sure many of us do, think "Oh my God, how horrible." And if we are white, we might also add, speaking to ourselves, "But that's not something I would ever do, nor would any of my friends or family."

The racist thoughts that I held, and continue to battle, may not have killed George Floyd. But they are at the root of what did. The poison of white supremacy, invisible to many of us, and very visible to people of color, is what has infected our soil for centuries, and prevented us from true understanding and faithfulness. It prevents us from hearing and following our savior who reaches out to the poor, the sick, and suffering, and says, "your life matters. The system around you, that places some at the top and some at the bottom, is not the way it should be. This is not the kingdom heaven. In my kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first."

I believe that to follow Christ, and to understand his Word proclaim his sovereignty over our lives, means we must also proclaim that Black Lives Matter.

The concept of God's sovereignty, that Christ is indeed the ultimate ruler in our lives, lies at the heart of our Reformed tradition, and is repeated over and over again by theologians throughout our history. If there is one word that I would take away from my Reformed Theology class in Divinity School, it would be sovereignty. And yet, and I can only speak for myself, I know that I continually fail to put Christ at the center of my life, and continually must grapple with the biases rooted in my brain. And I think one reason, along with my impulses toward pride, and greed, is that to truly listen to the Word proclaimed means to listen to that Word from voices who are not white.

James Cone expounds upon this idea, that the revelation of the Word requires listening to both scripture, and the voices of marginalized peoples, in his book *God of the Oppressed*. He writes, "Jesus Christ is the Truth and thus stands in judgment over all statements about truth. But having said that, we must immediately balance it with another statement, without which the first statement falsifies what it intends to affirm. We must state the other side of the paradox emphatically: There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land – their history and culture. And in America, the oppressed are the people of color...Indeed it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom. Their struggle is Jesus' struggle, and he is thus revealed in the particularity of their cultural history – their hopes and dreams of freedom."

As Cone states, the struggle of black people is the struggle of Jesus – God in human flesh, taking the form of a man of color, who taught us what it means to truly love and value the lives one another, and to enter into the kingdom building work of seeking justice for all.

Following Jesus means to unceasingly engage in the work of weed eating the racist ideas that inhibit our growth as Christians, and result in a world where black people cannot breathe. And sometimes, these weeds are not easy to identify. Like a bulb that has first begun to sprout, we may not always recognize what is the weed and what is the plant. Within the arc of justice that we continue to travel upon, 21st Century racism does not always look the same as it did in previous centuries. It may not be as clear as it was in 1963, when in my hometown, Governor George Wallace stood in front of the doors to Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama, and attempted to prevent Vivian Malone and James Hood from entering as students. To identify

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our modern weeds, and to hear the gospel in its fullness, I think we must listen to the Word as it comes to us from the voices of people of color, and take seriously the pain and anger which is a part of that Word. Otherwise, we will forever live into the warning that Jesus offers us from the prophet Isaiah, saying,

“You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.”

Friends, while we may be both the victims and the perpetrators of our neglected garden, Christ shows us a way forward. As the late theologian Katie Cannon, the first African-American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), states in our preparation for worship, everything we need is right here in front of us, in our faith, and in our scripture, but we must unleash it. Christ shows us what it means to love our neighbors, and to go to the margins and walk alongside people who are suffering. When I see people marching and protesting, working together, amplifying the voices of people of color, and envisioning a world where all might be treated with dignity, I see strength. When I hear people dreaming of a world where violence and inequity no longer dominates, and people might stand on equal and peaceful ground, I see courage and creativity. When I talk with the young adults at Idlewild, and my college students at Rhodes and the University of Memphis, who are fired up about what is happening in our country, and seeking to make it a better nation for all, I see hope. We can tend to our garden, and create a world in which all might flourish. This is what is possible in a life rooted in Christ Jesus, our Redeemer. Thanks be to God.