

Last week in the Creed class we looked at a critical question—perhaps the most critical question—the one Jesus asked of his disciples: Who do you say that I am?

There are many answers to that question—in class we looked at the theological **answers: savior, son of God, Lord. In Jesus' time people had other answers,** healer, troublemaker, liberator, threat, heretic, prophet. Most would agree he was a rabbi, a teacher, even a great and powerful teacher. **That's what we are** focusing on today—Jesus as teacher. Let us pray.

Think back to the teachers who made a difference in your life—the ones that changed things for you or other students. They generally have three common characteristics:

1. They care about those they teach.
2. They find different ways to teach—ways that are effective for different people.
- And 3. they bring a lesson of great importance, sometimes their official subject matter and sometimes more about life.

Jesus was a great teacher. And like many great teachers, he taught in many different ways. We looked last week at how the miracles of Jesus teach us things—how the miracles teach us to dream and to imagine what is possible. By healing paralysis, Jesus teaches that God empowers even the powerless. By casting out unclean spirits, Jesus teaches us that God liberates people from their fears and from oppression and those forces that trap us.

Jesus also taught in traditional ways—in lectures to crowds whether in the synagogues or in his mass sermons to the crowds. Some of those are recorded, like the Sermon on the Mount, or the teaching in the synagogue when he read **from Isaiah, and then declared: "Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing."** Jesus also taught informally, at dinners and while sitting by wells, and while walking down a road. Some of his sharpest statements were made at impromptu exchanges with opponents when he not only taught his opponents something, but us as well.

And of course, he taught his disciples in private.

Perhaps his most famous teaching method is the parables—stories that take a simple image or a common situation and teach something new or unexpected. Jesus often told the parables with this admonition: Whoever has ears, let them hear. Hear this story:

One dark and stormy night, a gang of thieves broke into a jewelry store, but they were on a mission with a difference. They didn't steal a thing. But they carefully went round the whole shop and switched all the price tags. Then they left. The next day, the staff came in, and because the thieves had been so careful, nobody noticed they'd even been there. Customers came and many people were spending huge amounts of money to buy cheap junk, while others were paying a couple of dollars for jewelry worth thousands of dollars. Each secure that the other was being foolish. Someone has switched the tags on our planet. We are continually bombarded with a different set of values, a different set of price tags, from those of the Kingdom of God. -

There is magic in stories—we like stories—as people, we like stories. People listen to stories without getting defensive. Those opponents of Jesus—they listen to everything and categorize it—agree/disagree, like/dislike, true/untrue. We see that today. Determine if someone is one political party or another, and if they are the party you don't agree with, disregard everything they say, regardless of whether it has merit—just because the speaker is the “opposition.”

But stories—we listen to stories. We are entertained by stories. We relate to stories without categorizing it. Stories draw people in and they let their guard down. Stories work their way into a person where we think about it, and the listener can ask questions, and see something deeper in the story. With simple stories, Jesus was able to teach people about his message.

Jesus had a consistent and an important message. Everyone who heard Jesus teach, whether in a large group, beside a well, as a disciple or in a parable, at some point, they would all hear about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

Today these words have very little meaning—perhaps as little or even less now than when Jesus first taught about the kingdom. Or perhaps worse—we misunderstand it.

For many people when they hear the phrase Kingdom of God, and especially kingdom of heaven, they think it means where people, where good people, go when they die. And that way of thinking, that way of understanding the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, not only diminishes what Jesus taught, but divides people and does exactly the opposite of what Jesus taught—instead of uniting people, teaching them to love each other, it divides people and invites them to judge each other—are they in or out of the kingdom becomes the focus.

But that isn't what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God.

In the parables we read today, the kingdom of God is something immediate, and something growing. **It isn't something far off or distant**—but rather the kingdom is at hand—it is present and immediate. Not some distant future, not a next life or an afterlife but Jesus taught that the kingdom was now and near.

The parable of the sower—

A man sows seeds by throwing the seeds far and wide. Some of the seed falls on a hard path where it sat on the surface and birds ate up the seeds. The seeds were flung far and landed on ground with thin soil. Because the soil is thin, the sun heats through and the seeds spout. But it also dries out, shrivels up and blows away. Some seed grows but gets chokes out by weeds and finally, the seeds that grow and yield a good crop.

And Jesus tells his disciples that by understanding the parables they have the secret to the kingdom of heaven.

The secret of the Lord was with them. The stories that instructed them, others were only amused with, and they were made to increase in knowledge by every parable, and understood more of the way and method in which God set

up God's kingdom in the world, while others went away, entertained and satisfied, but never the wiser.

But the parable of the light and the bushel also teaches that those who know the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, must acknowledge that it is given to them; they receive both the light and the sight from Jesus Christ, who, after his resurrection, both opened the scriptures, and opened the understanding. We aren't to hide what we learn, but to shine with that knowledge, the kingdom itself shining out through us—we become the light on the hill.

This image of the kingdom of heaven as a seed that takes root and grows and yields a harvest is in several parables, and the mustard seed, that is so small and grows into a shrub giving shade to the birds.

These parables teach us about the kingdom of God—which isn't about where we go when we die, but where and how we live now. If we have ears to hear, that is. So what can we hear?

What do we learn?

What do we learn about these stories about seeds? If a seed, a tiny seed, is like the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, let's think about what that tells us about the kingdom of God?

Let's look at what it's not. It's not showy or big or a super-power—at least not in the way we normally understand that term. It's not based on strength or a military or a power-structure. The kingdom or empire best known to the people of Jesus' time was the Roman empire, an empire with a top-down power structure, Caesar at the top and a few other top officials with control over the many at the bottom.

Empires are systems that rule through a system of rewards and punishments, and as an authoritarian regime, primarily through punishment. The punishments increasingly severe, from imprisonment, banishment, to torture and execution. How different from the kingdom of God. The opposite of a seed, which is small, with growth that happens without fighting, without harming others, without force—but naturally, organically, and the growth goes outward and upward. I have always been fascinated by the mustard seed. I wanted to bring in mustard seeds as a demonstration but realized you would never be able to see them. The parable says it is the smallest of seeds, but it isn't—not exactly—but it is a small seed. And if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed nothing will be impossible.

Some have identified a "subversive and scandalous" element to this parable, in that the fast-growing nature of the mustard plant makes it a "malignant weed" with "dangerous takeover properties". Pliny the Elder, in his Natural History (published around AD 78) writes that "mustard... is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

The tiny little mustard seed, a symbol of faith and a symbol of the kingdom of God—because the kingdom of God grows from that kernel of faith. A kingdom

built on faith, a kingdom at hand, a kingdom Jesus taught through stories and through his actions and through his life.

A kingdom that is very different from the kingdoms of the world. As I said, the **kingdom or empire best known to the people of Jesus' time was the Roman empire** with its

punishments and torture and execution.

The ultimate form of torture and execution was crucifixion and through his crucifixion, Jesus taught us the ultimate lesson about the kingdom of God, his most radical lesson of all. Jesus exposed the violent, top-down system as a fraud, and that the fear-based power of man-made government was not the best or only option. He showed that God's revolutionary kingdom wins, that life and love and faith win. That death and fear, in the end, do not win. Death, where is thy victory, Death were is thy sting. Paul could just have easily written, fear and intimidation, where is your victory? Worldly power, where is your victory?

Jesus taught that God's kingdom grows through apparent weakness rather than conquest.

God's kingdom wins, not through shedding the blood of its enemies, but through gracious self-giving on behalf of its enemies. As Brian McLaren puts it: God's kingdom "expands through reconciliation rather than humiliation and intimidation. It triumphs through a willingness to suffer rather than a readiness to inflict suffering. . . . on the cross Jesus demonstrated God's noncompliance with the world's brutal powers-that-be. He showed God to be a different kind of king, and God's kingdom to be a different kind of kingdom."

How do we translate all of this into our world today? After all, we aren't very familiar with kingdoms. Brian McLaren suggests we try out the following phrases: *God's regenerative economy*—as a challenge to our economy based on greed, competition and exploitation.

Global Commonwealth of God—a world not divided up into nations or corporations or by privilege.

God's beloved community—to remind us that we are all part of God's family and that there is a reverent connectedness and creative harmony

God's sustainable society or movement for mutual liberation—the radical new vision of life, freedom and community.

Not everyone could hear what Jesus had to say—despite the parables, despite Jesus' teachings.

That was true in Jesus' life and that's why those in power sought his arrest and trial and crucifixion. And it's true today. Some people are more interested in power, or revenge, or gaining an advantage, or isolation. Some are more interested in sex or desperate for money or power or fame. Some believe the only kind of winning, the only kind of kingdom that matters, is one of competition, one at the expense of another. They see the world as a zero sum game and to get ahead, someone must fall behind. Some think the only answer, even the only security in this life, can be bought with violence and having greater strength and greater capacity for violence than someone else.

But underneath it all, underneath the competition, underneath the violence, underneath the pain, there is still something. Something that can recognize the wisdom God shares with us. Something that can hear the message in Jesus' words. Something that recognizes the inherent good in God's creation. When you see someone give a helping hand, when you see a group care for an outsider, when you see people accept the stranger, there is a spark of something pure and something good and something holy—something made in the image of God. Something that reflects God's wisdom and God's law written on the heart. That is the part that hears the message in the parable, that finds the wisdom in the story, and that seeks first the kingdom of God. Because to be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to seek first the kingdom and just of God and to be a student of Jesus' favorite subject. Let all who have ears, hear. Amen.