

Imagine
July 30, 2017
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Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world,
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will be as one.

Do any of you remember 1971? It was a chaotic time, but also somewhat hopeful – at least when people used their imaginations. John Lennon, who wrote the song “Imagine” on the piano in the bedroom of his Ascot estate, later described the song's meaning and explained its commercial appeal: “Anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic, but because it is sugarcoated it is accepted.” Hmm...sugar-coated imagination?

Jesus asked his followers to use their imaginations, too...though I don't think he wrote songs for them to sing. He did tell parables. I think I have quoted C.H. Dodd, the biblical scholar, before about this, but I think it's useful to start with some sort of definition of what a parable is.

Dodd wrote:

“At its simplest, a parable is a metaphor or simile, drawn from nature or the common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

So we are not intended to be certain about the meaning of parables, we are meant to be “teased” into thinking. Teased into imagining. An interesting pathway into faith and into discovering the Kingdom, this teasing.

So let's first spend some time imagining why Jesus used the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven.” What do we normally associate with a kingdom or *basileia*, as Matthew would have said. First of all, a king, or a ruler. Then, territory. Then, laws or rules or norms. Then, probably, an army. And other features: a common language, perhaps an official religion. Of course in the days of Jesus, and for centuries beforehand, there were plenty of actual examples around for comparison. Many people harkened back with nostalgia to the kingdoms of Israel or Judah and looked for their restoration. In words that Jesus clearly echoed, the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel spoke of the restoration in arboreal terms:

“Thus says the Lord God, “I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches.”

“Imagine this,” Ezekiel seems to say. “It’s going to happen.”

But the fact is that the people listening to Jesus 500 years later were still waiting for that lofty and sheltering cedar. Instead, they found themselves under the thumb of another kind of kingdom, one that did not offer fruit or shelter, only raw naked power, and injustice. So they needed their imaginations teased again. They needed comfort and courage. We might even say that they needed defiant hope, to quote last week’s sermon title ☺

But the people who first heard these parables probably did not hear them as comforting agricultural or cooking stories. The details were unsettling, and unexpected. Jesus speaks of a kingdom that offers abundance, yes, but it is also invasive, a nuisance, shocking, and mysterious. If you want to get a sense of the Kingdom of Heaven, let’s talk about weeds in the garden and contaminants in bread. Wait, what? We need to make a bit of a leap to realize that neither mustard seeds nor yeast were positive images in the time of Jesus. No stately cedar, but the mustard weed, dreaded by farmers the way we dread crabgrass or bindweed or chickweed. It starts out small, but before long it has taken over. And yeast held the sense of contamination, and almost always represents the destructive work of sin in other New Testament writings.

And I am just getting started. The Kingdom of Heaven is like hidden treasure. That’s not so bad, until you realize that the man involved is a bit of a swindler: he finds something wonderful, hides it, then buys the property without disclosing its true worth. And he’s foolhardy: he sells *everything* that his family depends upon for livelihood, each stick of furniture, each tool of survival. You can imagine the first listeners shaking their heads at this story, as well as at that merchant who sells everything for a single pearl. The Kingdom of Heaven is full of impractical people, apparently.

We have to admit, though, that these stories all share a sense of urgency and reversal. “Imagine this,” says Jesus, “farmers are re-purposing fields, a peasant woman has baked enough bread for 100 people, merchants are giving up their businesses, serfs are buying land...and it’s going on all around you, even now. That net that is the Kingdom of Heaven is scooping all of us up in this revolution, and I wonder how you will respond?”

It seems almost like it’s warning us away from this Kingdom: be careful. People who have been overrun or contaminated by the Gospel have done some crazy counter-cultural things like sharing everything they have with others, standing up for their values when it does **not** further their career, helping people who have no ability to pay them back, and yes, forgiving those who hurt them. Be careful, or you will get swept up in that net.

Parables of the kingdom are completely redefining the meaning of kings and kingdoms. It has no definite time or place: it’s more like a process. The king does not rule through power, but through love. There is no physical territory. The laws and norms can be...a bit flexible. There is no army. We have some shared language or languages, but we are continually seeking better communication, knowing that this is a never-ending process. And any official religious institution must experience the humility of constant repentance and reformation. The Kingdom of Heaven is both pervasive and ephemeral.

If we were to imagine some parables that spoke to us, not as farmers or merchants or bakers, but as we are, what would they say? How would we express the quirky abundance and disruption

that Jesus offers? What stories would we tell to give each other courage and comfort and defiant hope?

“The kingdom of heaven is like being a pastor who couldn’t sing all that well, but whose choir director welcomed her participation.”

“The kingdom of heaven is hearing a sermon that was challenging and disruptive and finding a way to talk through our differences.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like the church member who visits an older member and takes her out for ice cream instead of to a worship service.”

What’s your parable? It’s actually better if it doesn’t make too much sense, apparently.

Now, the apostle Paul did not write parables. He wrote prayers, and advice, and theology. But today we heard some of his words that required parable-like imagination. He talks about hidden, subversive power, like the Holy Spirit helping us, somehow, in our weakness; like God’s mysterious calling and glorification of humble people. Then he says the most disruptive thing of all: “If God is for us, who is against us?...**Nothing** can separate us from the love of God in Christ.” So, all those very clearly powerful things that run the life of each person - life and death, rulers and powers – they have no power to keep God away from us. Imagine that! You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one who finds those words kind of breathtaking.

At the end of this series of parables, Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” and they answer, “Yes.” I have a sneaking feeling that Jesus would have been better pleased if they had said, “No, not at all.” Saying that you are perfectly clear about the meaning of these stories and images may just mean that you are too tired or too busy to use your imagination. You have decided not to be startled and upset by all the disruption Jesus is throwing your way.

So, I want to say, let’s keep scattering those kingdom-seeds that transform weedy fields into places of pervasive hospitality for the birds of the air. Let’s keep hiding kingdom-yeast in the bread, and then give the bread away. Let’s invest in fields with treasure, but let’s uncover the treasure. Let’s search for those pearls of great value, until we find that theirs is more than one, probably more than we ever could have imagined. Let’s throw our kingdom-nets wide and welcoming, knowing that our judgmental powers should never try to compete with the overwhelming mercy and love of God for all people – all the fish in that net. And let’s share and enact Paul’s great good news: nothing will be able to separate us from our God, the source and ending of love. God is for us, and so we need to be for each other. That is why forgiveness and forbearance are at the core of the Christian life.

Let us never become accustomed to the wonder of all this. Emily Dickinson wrote that “To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.” And I would say, to live with faithful imagination is so startling, that I will never stop trying to wrap my head around it.

You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope some day you’ll join us
And the world will be as one.

Amen.