

Listen!

When I was in the seminary, we practiced giving sermons. During one I said that the parables of Jesus were sweet, simple stories intended to convey an obvious message.

My professor fell off his chair and gave me an "F".

Little did I know at the time what parables really are, when put to use by Jesus.

Only after actually studying the parables, sitting with the parables, surrendering to the parables, did I learn:

They are hand grenades.

They are bazookas.

They exist in order to upset you and me, and the millions of you and me's down through the ages of the faithful.

In parables, Jesus removes our heads from our necks, shakes them out, and then begins to teach us what reality really is.

We will hear many parables this year, as we walk with Matthew from now til Advent.

Today's is the first.

It is, in a sense, the cornerstone of all the parables to follow.

It is the first parable told in Matthew's Gospel.

And it's not what it seems.

Plenty of us will hear this parable and think it's all about us.

Am I good soil or weeds? Hard pan or thorns?

Of course we know what WE are. We're here in church.

Of course, it goes without saying, WE are the fertile soil.

End of story. Next sermon please!

But this parable has a lot less to say about you and me than it says about God.

What kind of God is this who takes precious seed and tosses it everywhere?

A wasteful God, that's who!

An irresponsible God, that's who!

This kind of God probably doesn't even have a strategic plan or a set of targeted demographics or even a marketing strategy!

What Jesus does in this parable is to remind us NOT of something new about God, but about something very old indeed.

It's we who keep trying to bring God down to size, to make God angry and judgmental and fierce (maybe so God will look more like us).

Yet, hundreds of years before Jesus, God, through the prophet Isaiah announced:

"Listen! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money

for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ...For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and don't return until they've watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the task I set for them. And you will go out in joy, and be led back in peace..." *Isaiah 55:1-2, 10-13*

This extravagant God is God.

This is the God Jesus proclaims; this is the God who even now, in the most natural and most bizarre ways too, is breaking into the world.

Father Bob Capon says the parable of the sower teaches us that the Kingdom is catholic, it is mysterious, and it is already present among us; and not only present, but aggressively insisting on a response. Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 56 (paraphrase).

"Catholic" meaning universal, because the Word that is sown by the Father is Jesus, and Jesus is already sown all over the world!

Missionaries who travel to distant lands, when they get it right, don't go to **bring Jesus**, but to **discover the Jesus** who is already there.

The kingdom is "mysterious," because, like a seed, it seems to disappear as soon as it goes to work.

Kalfred Yee taught me that in one respect, Jesus has it wrong.

Jesus has it wrong when he says the mustard seed is the smallest seed.

Not so, Mr. Yee confirms, because the orchid seed, that's the smallest.

But whether it's a tiny mustard seed or a tinier still orchid seed, what is astonishing is the beautiful plant that comes from a seed that is practically invisible.

That's what the kingdom of God is like.

The kingdom of God is like a small child.

The kingdom of God is like a great banquet, whose host welcomes in the lost, the disabled, the outcasts.

Like Jesus on the cross, buried in the ground, resurrected and seen for a while, then seemingly --- gone again.

That's what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus says.

It is catholic, it is mysterious, and it is here, now, breaking in on us today, in ways we can see but only if we first take off our heads, shake them out, and look with the eyes, hear with the ears, that Jesus gives us.

Paul got that message.

His letter today is a frontal attack on our constant worries that we need to prove ourselves to God to be saved, that only some are saved, that God is the giant bookkeeper in the sky, just waiting to knock us down.

"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." Rom. 8:11.

No condemnation.

None at all.

Right now.

And yesterday; and tomorrow.

Why?

Because God loves us.

Paul gets the ridiculous, wonderful, too good to be true truth that Jesus came not to suffer in our place, or to show us how to earn God's love.

Jesus came, not because God had some kind of blood lust that needs satisfying.

No.

Jesus, in his utter faithfulness in this extravagant Father, remains faithful even to death, death on a cross, to show you, to show me, how much God *already* loves us.

His resurrection shows you and I that God's love is stronger than even the strongest enemy: death.

And if God's love is stronger than death, it is certainly stronger than our insecurities, our guilt's, our fears of not measuring up.

And with that, we can exhale.

Following the Way of Jesus is to see reality with new eyes.

For us modern folk, even science itself helps in this effort.

Despite the silly debates of science *versus* religion, God uses science to help us peer deeply into the mysteries of what we think we know.

You've perhaps read that physicists now believe that the smallest element in creation is something called a string.

Like a piano string, a violin string, only infinitely smaller.

So small that if an atom was the size of the universe, a string would be the size of one of our Cyprus trees outside.

Yet these strings, and the notes they create, may be the building blocks of all that exists, including you and I.

In other words, "deep in our core, we're all essentially made of music." Michael Finkle, *Men's Journal*, 104.

How's that feel?

Which takes us back to the very beginning of today's gospel:

"Listen!"

We live in times that cajole us into focusing on our day-to-day needs and our day to day wants.

A full stomach, paid bills and some entertainment and you know how happy that makes many of us most of the time.

And yet in our heart of hearts, we know that's not enough.

That kind of life turns us into Esau, who sells his birthright for a bowl of Zippy's chili.

Brother Jacob kept his eye on the bigger picture.

Jesus implores us to do the same.

"Listen!" Jesus shouts, and if we do, we might catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven peering out from behind that tree over there, leaning around the corner of that house, pushing up through the fertile ground across the parking lot.

The kingdom: singing the music of the God who calls us home.

The kingdom: singing the music of who we are at the very core of our being.

Listen!

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