

Disturbing the Peace

Parables are meant to disturb us. We talked about this extensively last week. A parable is a unique kind of teaching, one that Jesus used often. The purpose of a parable is not so much to teach truth as to subvert it, to shake the foundations of what we think we know, so that we might become open to new possibilities, new ways of understanding ourselves, the world and God.

The fact that Jesus teaches so frequently in parables should tell us something important about the very nature of our faith. Richard Holloway explains, "Christianity isn't meant to explain the world; it is meant to disturb it."¹

A Disturbed Community

Matthew's community, the original audience for his Gospel, was a troubled community. They had been cast out of their houses of worship. These men and women would have identified themselves as Jews and as followers of this radical rabbi Jesus. Yet their way of making sense of and embodying the faith put them at odds with the traditionalists. This created tension and the community split, and Matthew's community was cast out. They no longer held the "right beliefs." Cut off from their roots and without a home, we can imagine that they would have harbored a lot of bitterness toward those that cast them out.

I offer this rather simplistic summary of a long and complicated process as a way of setting the context for today's parable. I think it helps us clarify and deal with some of the rather harsh statements made in today's parable.

Like Matthew's community our parable also features a split: the sheep on the right and the goats on the left. Those on the right are welcomed into the kingdom of God. Those on the left are cast out into eternal punishment.

It is not hard to see what Matthew is doing here. He is reversing the community's narrative. He is saying, "You may have been cast out of your house of worship by the elders, but in the reality Jesus called the kingdom of God, it is you who will be welcomed and they who will be cast out."

It seems to be part of the human nature that those who have been mistreated go on to mistreat others. It isn't always the case, but it does happen often. It seems counterintuitive. We might think that those who have experienced harsh treatment would refuse to do the same, but there is a cycle that has to be broken first. And as the violent history of our own tradition reminds us, it is hard to break the cycle.

So what do we do with these texts except learn from them and from past mistakes?

¹ Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity*, (Canongate: 2001), 134.

Peeling the Orange

One of my colleagues offered a helpful metaphor in our Bible study this week. He said reading Matthew is like eating an orange. In order to enjoy the sweet fruit in the middle of the orange you have to peel off the bitter rind. The sweet fruit is the good news of God's love for us, but the rind is the insistence that the judgment visited upon Matthew's community is somehow indicative of God's judgment of us. This is not to say that judgment does not have a role to play, just that the stark division of people where half are cast into the outer darkness seems to be in conflict with the good news of God's love for all of us.

The Paradox of Faith and Works

But even after we peel off the outer bitterness of this parable, there are still challenges to be found. For one it subverts the notion that "right belief" is all that matters.

Matthew's community was kicked out because they did not hold the "right beliefs." So they would have found the message of this parable quite delicious, for what actually counts according to this story is "right action."

You see, it isn't just that some are chosen and some are not, some are sheep and some are goats. It is the basis upon which the decision is made. Those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned are exalted. Those who fail to do these things are condemned.

In theological terms, this is called "works righteousness." It is the idea that we must earn our way into God's good grace by our good works. This is a popular and widely held belief. We often say things like, "I don't know what he believed, but he was a good and kind person. That's what counts."

Matthew's community may very well have resonated with that idea, but the Christian tradition has moved on quite a ways from this point. In fact, the truth of the matter is that this parable creates its own tension for us as Presbyterians. As part of the reformed wing of the church, we are adamant that we are saved "by grace alone." Salvation is a gift from God, not a status we earn for ourselves.

So in a very real sense, this parable subverts our reformed faith. It offers a counter-balance to our doctrine of grace alone. As it says in the book of James, "faith without works is dead."

It is interesting, the Bible seems very comfortable holding these two opposites in tension: grace and works. It is we who try to figure it out. It is one or the other. It can't be both. But maybe it can. The parable at least raises that tension to our attention.

When Was It That We Saw You?

Yet, it is the question “When was it that we saw you?” that really gets us to the heart of this parable. Remember, the purpose of the parable is to teach by disturbing what we think we know, so that we might be open to new perspectives and possibilities.

While there is clear separation between the sheep and the goats, there is one thing they both have in common. Both groups are surprised to learn that they had seen the Lord prior to this encounter. Neither recognized the Lord as they were acting—or failing to act—as they did.

Tom Long writes, “The dramatic disclosure, that Jesus Christ is present in the world in ‘the least of these who are members of my family’ is the focal point of this parable.”²

Rewind

Last Sunday we talked about the parable that immediately precedes this one: the parable of the talents. I submitted that one way to read the parable is that it is about our pictures of God. In that parable there are three slaves. Two view their master as kind and generous. The last views him as harsh and greedy. The quality of their actions depends on how they view of their master. So too with us and our pictures of God: if we believe God is angry and judgmental, we will act in ways that are driven by fear. But if our picture of God is one of grace and justice, we will be free to act with love and mercy.

The parable of the sheep and goats builds on this theme. This parable is not so much about how we view God, however, but how we view each other. Richard Holloway writes, “...those who try to use the example of Jesus have to look at people differently, to practice imaginative compassion, to see the world as it might be and not simply as it is...”³

Gate A-4 By Naomi Shihab Nye⁴

Noamic Shihab Nye offers us this story of what can happen when we use imaginative compassion:

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well— one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. “Help,” said the flight agent. “Talk to her . What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. “Shu-dow-a, shu-bid-uck, habibti? Stani schway, min fadlick, shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the

² Tom Long, Matthew (Westminster John Knox: 1997), 285.

³ Holloway, 230.

⁴ <http://davidkanigan.com/2014/11/16/gate-a-4/>.

next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies— little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts— from her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single traveler declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

Then the airline broke out free apple juice and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend— by now we were holding hands— had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate— once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

Heaven Shall Not Wait

When was it that we saw you, Lord? When we share our food with the hungry, our drink with the thirsty, our welcome with a stranger, our clothes with the naked, our time and caring with the sick and imprisoned, when we share ourselves with one another, we experience the truth that undergirds all of our lives...God is always sharing God's self with us.

When was it that we say you, Lord? The disturbing truth, however, is that you and I miss moments like these every day, all the time. They pass us by or we pass them by. We don't go to the gate. We don't share our food and drink. We don't make time to care. Or worse yet, because we've been hurt, we harden our hearts toward others. We judge them without knowing them. We cast them out.

When was it that we saw you, Lord? But the good news is that *heaven shall not wait* for us to get it right, to have it all figured out. Heaven is breaking into this world right now in places like gate A4, in places that you and I visit every day.

When was it that we saw you, Lord? Where was it that we missed you, is more like it! Or how about, where is it that will see you next? Because it really can happen anywhere.