

## REVOLUTIONARY PARABLES

7/26/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)

Proper 12 (A): Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 128; ~~Romans 8:26-39~~; Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Have you seen the Broadway production of Hamilton yet? It's streaming free on Disney Plus this month, and it's amazing! I was given the soundtrack by some friends, so I listened for a week to get my ear attuned to the flow of the rap music, and then watched the show this past Saturday.

What a production! People moving and singing in unexpected ways all over the stage. The choreography is mind-blowing! It's a piece of history that could become boring on stage, yet it's lively and engaging. And, everything about the production is thought-provoking. Lin-Manuel Miranda created and starred in the musical, and as a longtime advocate for community activism and social justice, he purposefully set out to represent things in new ways.

For example, rather than use the traditional music from the time-period, he used the ground-breaking music of our times—rap and hip-hop—to represent the revolutionary ways of Hamilton and his compatriots. Likewise, to represent the immigrant lives of Hamilton and others, the composer intentionally chose a cast of all non-white actors, except for one. With these counter-cultural moves, Miranda chose to represent the spirit of diversity present in the vision this country's founders once held.

That's what Jesus does with the parables we find in today's Gospel reading. He takes something we all know and want—nourishment and belonging—and uses something uncommon to represent the spirit of that need. Of course, for us to understand the full mind-blowing-ness of these parables, we need some historical context.

You see, mustard plants and yeast, back in the Ancient Near East, were not thought of in the same way we think of them now. Mustard and yeast—or leaven—were things to be avoided. Mustard and leaven were seen as unclean and, in many cases, signs of evil. So, Jesus intentionally takes these very lowly, unwanted things and suggests that those very elements could become life-giving, and places of nourishment. Not only would they offer nourishment, they would offer an abundance of nourishment!

A mustard plant, in terms of farming, was a weed back then. It was a plant, like a dandelion, that could sneak into a crop and take over. It was invasive; farmers didn't want mustard bushes popping up in the middle of their crops. The same is true of leaven. Leaven, in that time and day, was a part of a process that could easily spoil and become lethal. It was a symbol of corruption and impurity.

Good story-tellers—whether in the form of a Broadway production or a parable—grab our attention by making the point in unusual and interesting ways. Jesus tells these parables—which often seem to contradict other things he's said—to wake up his followers. To get them thinking—to get us thinking—he grabs our attention by stating things in revolutionary ways.

Of course, inherent in the teachings of Jesus is that the reign of God is one that can't easily be understood in human concepts. Try as we might, we'll get it wrong if we try to reduce God's reign to human terms. But God's reign is not built on human concepts. God's reign is built

on the Divine concept that everyone—the entire human race—is a beloved child of God, and should, therefore, be treated equally with dignity and respect.

Several years ago, I was on a walk with a gardening friend of mine. As we passed some colorful Foxglove blooms, I commented on their beauty. She hissed, “Foxgloves are weeds!” I remember thinking a couple different things: 1) “Well, I think that WEED is pretty!” and 2) “Who decides what’s a weed and what’s not?”

Which takes us back to that mustard plant. A weed is anything that creeps up in what would otherwise be an orderly crop or garden. And, as I mentioned, weeds are considered invasive, as they typically take over the “planned” crop.

That’s what the in-breaking of God’s reign is like. One wouldn’t think we want “weeds” in our parish mission, but Jesus is saying we do! In the midst of our orderly notion of what Church looks like, something happens that we weren’t expecting, and we have to respond differently.

Most of us would never have said, “let’s close down our preschool and use that space for something else.” But in the midst of a pandemic crisis, that requires new ways of thinking and searching for ways to mitigate risk, while still living into our mission, we hear God calling us to pivot.

Our little preschool lovingly served 1000s of families over the past three decades; that is the legacy Nancy and the rest of the preschool staff leave. Now, we ask what if we could use those classrooms to help people who can’t afford to pay tuition or a fee for services? What if our weed that becomes a place of shelter and nourishment in the midst of this COVID crisis is an Advocacy or Drop-in Center, where people can come to use the internet, to do a load of laundry, or to receive mental health support?

A few months ago, a newer parishioner emailed me to affirm these kinds of social justice missions. She explained that when their young family went searching for a church, they were seeking a place that would help reinforce the values they were hoping to instill in their daughters. They were looking for a church where social justice was at the forefront of the mission; and they’ve stayed, because that’s what they’ve found at St. Andrew’s.

It might feel like we are in a field that has been completely overrun by weeds, but God promised all things will be made new. And today’s Gospel promises that the transformation will happen through ordinary people like a farmer, a fisherman, or a housewife. Transformation happens through ordinary people like you and me.

-AMEN

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Genesis 29:15-28**

Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

**Psalm 128**

- 1 Happy are they all who fear the LORD, \*  
and who follow in his ways!
- 2 You shall eat the fruit of your labor; \*  
happiness and prosperity shall be yours.
- 3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house, \*  
your children like olive shoots round about your table.
- 4 The man who fears the LORD \*  
shall thus indeed be blessed.
- 5 The LORD bless you from Zion, \*  
and may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.
- 6 May you live to see your children's children; \*  
may peace be upon Israel.

**Romans 8:26-39**

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to

be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Matthew 13:31-33,44-52**

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."