

Mustard Seed Conspirators

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 26#, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46](#)

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Jesus taught in parables. That's one of the things we learn about him early in our faith development. It occurs to me, however, that we lump together many different types of teachings under that one term, "parable."

"Once there was a man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who was set upon by robbers who beat him and robbed him and left him for dead at the side of the road." That's how Jesus, according to Luke, begins a story that we call "the parable of the Good Samaritan." The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (or prodigal) son are stories. The parable of the sower who threw seed all over the place so that it landed in four different types of soil is a story.

Story parables are very different in style from the parables in today's scripture lesson. The parables in today's scripture lesson are much more like koans than stories, though koans can be little stories, too. You've probably heard the term "koan" even if you're not completely sure what a koan is. Koans are used in the Zen branch of Buddhism (and its related branches in southeast Asia) for teaching.

To over-simplify, a koan is a statement, typically a brief statement or very brief story, that invites the hearer into deep reflection. It can do this by confounding the logical mind. The classic Zen koan, "When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping," does this by inviting us to start by figuring out how one hand can clap. Which is pretty confounding to the logical mind.

Koans can do this inviting by being filled with wisdom. Another classical koan goes like this:

Nan-in, a Zen master, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

As one website put it, Zen koans "are ambiguous and paradoxical, waiting for our minds to open up enough to allow the space for deep intuition to emerge – beyond knowing and into no-minding, through the use of imaginative mindfulness."¹

¹ Gary Z. McGee, "5 Zen Koans that Will Open Your Mind," *Fractal Enlightenment*, <https://fractalenlightenment.com/37292/spirituality/5-zen-koans-that-will-open-your-mind> (accessed 19 July 2020). The koans used are also from this page (though with some minor alterations to fit my speaking style).

The parables in today's scripture reading do this, too. "The kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field." Uhhhhh. Sure thing, Jesus. "The kin-dom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Riiiiiiiiight.

A brief aside here. Matthew actually uses "the kingdom of heaven," rather than "the kingdom of God." That is probably because he was writing for a community of Jesus-followers who saw themselves as Jews, and good Jews don't call God by name, so Matthew uses "heaven." That difference really is of no importance to today's sermon.

One of the side effects of these parables being koan-like is that I can hear something different each time I read them. The thing that's been coming up for me as I've let these parables roll around in my conscious and unconscious mind for the past five or six weeks is that there's something subversive about them.

I suppose there's something subversive happening every time Jesus talks about the kin-dom of God. The word we translate "kingdom" is the word that was used to describe what we now call the Roman Empire. Whenever Jesus talks about the "kin-dom of God," he's talking about the realm that stands in opposition to the kingdom of Rome. And in these parables, that sense of subversiveness seems much stronger to me.

- The kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny seed, that someone plants in a field – presumably a field where something other than mustard plants was the crop – and it grows into substantial shrub.
- The kin-dom of God is like yeast (something that's unclean during Passover) that a woman (not just a person; a woman) mixes into flour until all the flour is leavened (that is, transformed).
- The kin-dom of God is like a treasure that hidden in a field, and when someone finds it, they go sell all they have so they can purchase that field and own that treasure.
- The kin-dom of God is like a merchant in search of pearls (it's like the merchant, not the pearls), and when they find an amazing pearl, they will let go of everything else so they can possess that pearl.

A seed planted; yeast mixed in; an amazing treasure hidden; a single-minded merchant searching.

These koan-like parables are telling me that the kin-dom of God is messing with conventional wisdom, the kin-dom of God is messing with the powers that be. The kin-dom of God doesn't stop when we've been granted the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. The kin-dom of God calls us to change the things we can no longer accept (to paraphrase Angela Davis).

James Owensby said, "Naming what is unacceptable – and taking steps to change it – is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. It's at the core of compassion. And compassion takes courage."²

² Jake Owensby, "Finding the Courage to Change," *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10417/finding-the-courage-to-change> (posted and accessed 21 July 2020).

The word “compassion” literally means to suffer with – com- (with) -passion (suffer). Owensby goes on to say, “Christlike compassion is not pity, a mere recognition of someone else’s bad fortune. It is a heart-to-heart connection. A recognition that my neighbor’s hunger, deprivation or oppression are my own as well. That my freedom and happiness cannot be separated from theirs.”³

That’s why I’ve been thinking lately that being an ally may not be enough. Maybe I’m splitting semantic hairs, but the word “ally” seems to keep us separate. If we’re really going to end racism, sexism, poverty, and militarism and the war economy, we have to see that each of these issues is interconnected, and that we cannot move toward freedom, justice, equality, and dignity for all people – that is, toward the kin-dom of God – unless we are co-conspirators with each other. And if you don’t see how we’re all connected by those issues, look at the climate crisis. It will impact all of us.

Sandhya Jha (who’ll be preaching here in August, by the way) recently wrote about this need to be more than allies. She noted that we (regardless of our color) too often “see people of color primarily as victims when [people of color] actually might be role models”⁴ even as people of color have work to do on how white supremacy leads them to cause harm as well. Similarly, we can’t see white people solely as oppressors or solely as the profitters of white supremacy. The reality is that white supremacy also does damage to white people with its insidiousness. “What’s that quote,” she asked, “about how if you always have your boot on the neck of people of color, you also have no freedom of motion or elevation beyond that pose?”⁵

Sandhya points to this quote from Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian visual artist, activist and academic:⁶ “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

“Conspire” literally means to breathe with – con- (with) -spire (breathe). And in many cultures and languages the words for breath and spirit are deeply connected. It’s true in Hebrew. It’s true in ancient Greek. It’s true in Hawaiian (the “ha” of “aloha” refers breath/spirit).⁷

Right now, it is medically dangerous for us to be physically breathing together in the same room. But that doesn’t mean we need to stop breathing together metaphorically and virtually. The kin-dom of God needs mustard seed conspirators. Let us, though our prayers and our actions breathe more freedom, justice, equality, and dignity for all people into the world.

Amen.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sandhya Jha, *Facebook* post <https://www.facebook.com/pastorsandhya/posts/10158854673851617> (posted and accessed 17 July 2020).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Lilla Watson,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson (accessed 25 July 2020).

⁷ See, for instance, <https://www.waikoloacc.org/aloha-hawaiian-word-devotional/>.

Question for Reflection

- How is your liberation bound up with the liberation of others?
- Who do you need to be breathing with?
- How might you engage with the kin-dom conspiracy?