

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: July 30, 2023

“True meanings in Parables”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost. As we continue the journey in the Gospel of Matthew, we are given today a series of the “kingdom of heaven is like” parables. And in following the conversation from Amy Cook last week, let’s see what is really going on.

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew; the readings for the last several weeks are a teaching chapter meant to have specific meanings to the Jewish community of Jesus’ time. Since we are working from ancient texts we have no way of knowing if these chapters, were taught by Jesus on the same day, days apart, or appropriately for the season of the year. But we do know they were meant to challenge the status quo of his time. He lived in a very judgmental society, not unlike today.

One would think that we understand these parables to some degree, but there is the question, do we? Because hidden away in the depths of these parables is a very sinister message. Jesus told us last week that not only are the weeds and wheat mixed in the field (the good working side by side with evil) but that they are, at times, hard to distinguish. Today’s message is that humans also contain a mix of positive and negative. We have potential for both good and bad. Yet we are often incompetent to distinguish between the two. But in order to determine this message you need to understand the culture in which these parables have their meaning.

And although I won't go through each parable presented here as the day needs to move forward, I will give you an example of what Jesus is really trying to convey. I have chosen the parable of the yeast which is actually a bit misnamed. Today, yeast comes in those tidy little packets, or for those of us who are foodies, you can make yeast rise from using a bit of starter.

Starter for leavening bread today, if you were one of those bakers of the Covid times, often meant a neighbor brought by a baggie or Tupperware that contained a sickly-sweet smelling, honey-consistency brown goo that made your bread tasty and caused it to rise. So, hearing of a woman baking bread this way does not bring the message that Jesus is trying to convey.

What Jesus is talking about is yeast or leaven before there were baggies or Tupperware. He is referring to a rotting, molding lump of bread. The moldy bread contains the gasses and bacteria that pass into the new flour and dough and, just like our nice sanitized starter, it will make the bread rise.

So, what does all this have to do with the kingdom of God? In this case, Jesus is referring to the leaven, the yeast as a negative symbol of corruption. He is talking about the rotted bringing about change. The good and the bad working side by side. Not much different than our weeds and wheat story.

The woman takes this leaven and mixes it in the flour. Given the cultural perspectives of Jesus' day, all these details make it sound like something potentially sinister and furtive is going on. The good and the bad are bound together. And yet, the leaven, the stinking rotten bread starter, brings forth enough to feed about 100 people.

These stories share that we are all in this mess together and we all have choices about how we handle ourselves. We have great potential to be abundant in faith and allow God to guide us through the rough patches. In other words, to take our rotten moldy bread and bring it into goodness and abundance. We can take our good and feed others with what we have learned, or we have the other end of the story which is doubt, self-doubt, and negative ways of being. Thus allowing the rot and the mold to eat us into nothing worthy - feeding no one. But God wants you to be abundant! He desires you to choose life.

And then Jesus explains that we need to teach these lessons of taking the bad and turning it into good. To accept that the good and bad are side-by-side and it is not for us to judge.

“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.” The emphasis is on the newness of what Jesus is teaching.

And what is this ancient message Jesus is now proclaiming anew? What do we learn from these parables for which allegorical explanations are given? Namely: The dominion of God may not always appear to be succeeding in the world, and even the Church itself is a mixed bag of good and evil. But in the end, God will sort things out. Notice it is God doing the sorting, not us.

When I visit people who are struggling with their lives and with their faith, when I do last sacraments for someone on hospice, after all the formalities are done and the oils put away, the wafer and wine consumed, I take Jesus' teachings to heart. No matter whether I am in a mansion in the Oakland Hills, a small ranch in Dixon, or even in the one-room studio apartment that houses multiple generations, I am

keenly aware that I cannot judge the life in front of me. That is not my place. That is not your place.

No matter what that patient or family has shared, no matter what their friends and neighbors think, in those last moments, it is only God who can tell the rotten leaven starter from the finished loaf of bread. And so, I take myself out of the equation and utter the words Paul gives to the Romans in understanding of the deepest meaning of these parables. Heed these words well, they really are a comfort.

“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.” Amen