

Genesis 29 and Matthew 13 (mostly Matthew)
July 26 2020

I often say that scripture readings are delicious - and that what I want most in Bible study and in sermons is for us to chew on them for a while.

Yes - I am a food focused person.

In this case, I have to say that the Genesis reading is not so delicious to me, and has quite a bitter aftertaste. I don't know about you, but that reading makes me sad and angry and left with more questions than answers....and at our Wednesday afternoon Bible study Zoom group we decided that I should focus on the parables this morning and so that's what I'm going to do.

But first - I want to tell you a couple of things that went into my thinking about the Genesis reading and the parables too.

- 1) At the moment I'm reading a book called Life Lived Like a Story: the life stories of three Yukon Native Elders. Their stories have been transcribed as they told them, and so what you hear in the book is the voices of three women telling their own life stories in their own words. It's giving me a renewed appreciation for what it means to simply listen. Listen to the story. Don't ask what it means. Don't try to analyze, categorize....just listen.

2) Did you listen to Canada Reads this year? It's just finished recently. One of the books in the running was Son of a Trickster by Eden Robinson. The panelist defending that book as the one book Canada needs to read this year said among other things.....

First nations tell stories. That's what they do. That's how they understand themselves and the world and the meaning of it all. Stories. And these stories have survived against unimaginable odds, and are being recovered and retold and don't you think it's time, she said...don't you think it's time for the rest of us to just – be quiet listen?

So I've been thinking a lot about stories.

That's how Jesus taught. His culture was very much a culture of stories.

That's how the people of Jesus' world and the world from long before that – the world that told and retold and then wrote down the stories like the one about Leah and Rachel we read today – that's what they did. That's how they experienced their world. The wise ones told stories. And the others listened patiently.

It's only recently in the sweep of world history that people say what does it MEAN?

So back to Genesis. I'm not preaching on it...we're going to move to the parables...but if I WERE to preach on it, the one goal I would have is to simply remember the names of these women. Speak their names. In this whole narrative, starting with A and S, told from a male point of view, it's astounding that the stories of the women are told at all and that their names are preserved

there's a woman counter narrative running through, an underground stream of resistance and subversion, I'd say, that bubbles up from time to time. With a name. A story. A sacred memory of a woman's experience

so I just want to say their names today. Two sisters – treated like – property – because that's what they were....two sisters. Leah. Rachel. AND two slave girls – Bilah. Zilpah. Treated even more inhumanely than that. Producers of babies for the master. It's astonishing that their names are remembered and repeated -

for their reproductive function, but still...

So let me just say their names again: Alphabetical order this time

.
BILAH, LEAH, RACHEL AND ZILPHA.

Mothers of the 12 tribes of Israel.

BILAH. LEAH. RACHEL. ZILPAH.

May your memory be sacred. May we never forget you, and may you rest in the arms of the Holy One forever.

Speaking of stories.....take a listen to this:

*The kingdom of heaven is like.....
a mustard seed.*

*Someone took it, planted it in the field
and it's 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.

What do you think of that?

Or.....

what about this?

*The kingdom of heaven is like.....
yeast.*

*A woman took it, hid it in three measures of flour
until the whole thing was leavened.*

What about that?

These parables are short and punchy and they kind of tease you, you know? You want to say

“yabbut....but what does it MEAN??”

and I picture Jesus saying

“It means...

the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Someone took it, planted it in the field, and it's the smallest of all the seeds

but when it grows, it is the greatest of shrubs, and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

It means

the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. A woman took it, hid it in three measures of flour until the whole thing was leavened”.

For some, it means that the small things they are doing now that may seem insignificant, can be trusted in the economy of God's grace and growing can be trusted to grow into far more than we can imagine.

It could mean that the way you treat your children or grandchildren today – the stories you tell them, the values you try to model and instill, the confidence and character you encourage in them, will someday – someday – grow into something like a tree – strong and unexpected and beautiful and able to reach out to the world

For others it might mean that the world right now seems lifeless and dry.....but there is indeed hidden within it an agent of life and transformation that is working beyond our sight and some day the whole three measures of flour (that's a lot of flour by the way – it's exactly the amount of flour that Abraham asked Sarah to prepare for their visitors so many centuries before Jesus told this story...but I digress....or do I?) some day that whole lot of dry and lifeless flour – the dry, lifeless world – will be transformed.

Might mean those things.
Might mean something else
to you.

A couple of things might help, as background:

In the time of Jesus
neither mustard nor yeast was seen as a positive thing.

At this time, yeast is considered a contaminant. You may remember that in Israel at that time, holy bread was unleavened bread. To prepare for holy days you removed all the yeast from your home. Holy bread had no yeast (when Protestantism began to use leavened bread for communion – well – you should read some of the letters to the editor from that time! To say that the ordinary IS the holy was and still is considered radical and subversive – just like the gospel)

Mustard is indeed a tiny seed but, they say, the farmers in those days hated it because if you let it get a hold in your field it would take right over.

Like crabgrass. Like dandelions.

Conventional thinking says they are weeds....

You can't stop it. The reign and realm, the divine domain, the kingdom of heaven is just like that. Some consider it dangerous and want to dig it out. Nail it to a cross.

But you can't get rid of dandelions. They'll grow anywhere in spite of your best efforts. And you can nail a man to a cross but you can't stop the grace of God and the transforming power of the gospel of love. You can't stop it.

One image from the book of Ezekiel that Jesus certainly knew, and his listeners also knew, and we should know, in order to let this image work its work in us. Just listen to THIS.

*“Thus says God:
I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar
I will set it out,
I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.
On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
Under it, every kind of bird will live
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.
All the trees of the field shall know that I am God
I bring low the high tree
I make high the low tree
I dry up the green tree
and make the dry tree flourish.
I - your God – have spoken
I will accomplish it” - Ezekiel 17: 22-24*

There is NO WAY that Jesus is not invoking this text. His hearers know their scripture and they have heard this many times. It speaks of the ways of God –

who turns the world upside down
and who is busy even now making right the wrongs
lifting up the lowly
and teaching us what's what in the economy of grace –

EVERY KIND OF BIRD will live in the shade of its branches and make nests there.
In the welcoming branches of a tree that was considered a pest and a weed

God will offer rest and welcome, home, feeding....to a broken hearted, oppressed and hopeless people

That's the new thing that this parable offers
that welcome is being offered right here and right now
not in the noble cedar of Ezekiel
but in the branches of a rogue weed that's wildly out of control
because that's how God works.

Like a little lump of yeast bubbling away, hidden, inside the flour.

you have no idea how that's going to transform the flour
and how extravagantly, outrageously and recklessly
God will feed thousands
who are hungry
hungry for bread
and hungry for justice, and righteousness
and hungry for the holy within themselves

Because that's how God works.

So let these parables bubble away within you
let the seed of them find root in the soil that is you

and who knows what will come of it?
And maybe
just maybe
we'll find ourselves in the branches of a tree
with some really good bread
sharing the loaves and the leaves
with the likes of Bilah and Leah, Rachel and Zilpah
in the wild and crazy kingdom of heaven.

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Let's go now -
the story has been told – the Word has been spoken - like seeds
the story is being told -the Word IS being spoken - like yeast

and we are that story - like a tree made for sheltering and welcoming birds of every kind.
Offering them shelter, safety, a place to rest and find a home

let's go to take our place with those whose stories have yet to be told
and those who would like to have told their own stories
but could not.

Let's plant those seeds

let's go to take our place with
Bilah, Leah, Rachel and Zilpha

and countless nameless others

Until we grow together into a tree whose branches have room for all.