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“Solutions: Part II”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

July 30, 2017

**1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-132;
Romans 8:26-29; Matthew 13:21-33; 44-52**

There was once someone who said and did such wonderful life-giving
and life-affirming things, that all kinds of people followed him.
Jewish people followed him, certainly, because he was a Jew and a rabbi,
and because he taught in the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel.
But other people followed him, too, because he spoke kindness to their pain,
and hope to their helplessness.
Sick and addicted people followed him, homeless people followed him,
thirsty and hungry people followed him,
barren women and orphans followed him,
oppressed and lonely people followed him, as did non-Jewish people.
They couldn't help it. He just had that magnetism. Things he said rang true
in a world that was oppressing them with untruths.

As they followed this man called Jesus, they heard him talking about a kingdom,
that was not the realm they lived in.

Nor was it like any realm they had ever visited or even heard of.

It was the kingdom of heaven.

But he couldn't tell them directly about what it was like,

because they were unequipped to understand it that way.

So he told it slant; he planted it and hid it in stories about things

familiar to them: like little seeds that grow into large trees;

like little bits of yeast that leaven a whole loaf;

hidden treasures and fine pearls;

and he even threw in a few fish stories, because everyone likes those.

And I wonder what rang true to those people about those kingdom stories?

Perhaps it has something to do with our amazing capability as human beings

to imagine a future that may not exist now.

(Gilbert, Daniel. *Stumbling on Happiness*, as quoted by Harold Ivan Smith

in *Eleanor*, p. 53)

Or, even as they imagined a future that may not now exist,

perhaps Jesus' stories offered an incredible newness of life in the present,

right now, too.

And I wonder what connection people made between Jesus' words and their world,

between Jesus' kingdom stories, and their own realm of being,

just as I make my own connections, and you make yours.

Here is one of mine.

I was born on the cusp of 1954, and was baptized into that landmark legislation called *Brown v. The Board of Education*, which declared unconstitutional any state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students. *Brown* is a preeminent law that has shaped and governed my whole life.

And as a consequence of this law, I consider myself to have been part of three significant social experiments in North Carolina:

- 1) I was part of the stubborn stonewalling effort to ignore the federal law completely during my early elementary school years;
- 2) I was part of an effort to comply with the law minimally, in providing token integration in an attempt to modestly satisfy the courts;
- 3) And finally, in my junior high and high school years, I was part of the fruit-basket turnover that affected every public school student in the Charlotte/Mecklenburg School system in bringing each school into compliance according to a quota system of fair racial balance.

Thus racial integration of the public schools was nothing of my doing, personally, but something in which I was a participant in the days of Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963; and in the days of his famous "I Have a Dream Speech"; and in the days of the Civil Rights Act of 1964;

and in the sad days of Dr. King's assassination in 1968,
when the dream almost died.

I am proud to have been part of that great social experiment, which frankly,

I had hoped would take root, and grow into the greatest of trees,
so that all of the little black and white boys and girls of our nation could come

and play among its branches, like they do in the magnolia tree

in our church yard. (Check it out for yourselves after worship!)

I thought I was part of God's kingdom dream; part of that future story that

only barely and fragilely existed then, but which would become

deeply rooted and ultimately fruitful later, hopefully.

I don't want to talk about myself a lot here, except to let you know that the integration

of our nation's public schools means a great deal to me,

is of ultimate value to me, has always been a priority to me, in the parabolic way

that *all birds* flock to that kingdom tree,

that yeast is intentionally *integrated* into kingdom flour,

that treasure found is *treasure retained*,

that beautiful *pearls are keepers* no matter the cost,

and that kingdom nets pull in *all kinds of fish*.

So I felt my heart sink when I read a guest column by Ferrell Guillory,

from UNC's School of Journalism in *The Herald Sun* recently,

with the headline: "An 'Alternative Universe' Required

to Stifle School Resegregation".

Could he be speaking my language about public education, I wondered,

and could he also be talking about God's realm, this alternative universe?

Guillory notes documentation from a study completed last month

of the South's backsliding on school integration over the past 20 years.

Through the 1970's, this study says, "the share of black students attending intensively

segregated schools dropped sharply, from nearly 80 percent to 23 percent."

Some locales in the South in the 70's had higher levels of racial integration than schools elsewhere in the nation, he notes. That was all great news.

Now, however, "more than one in three black students attends an intensely-segregated school in the region today".

And, double segregation is also at play in our schools: segregation by race *and* by poverty.

On the average, the study notes, black, Latino and low-income students head to schools in which low-income students make up 70 percent of the enrollment.

What is the solution to this disheartening backslide, Guillory wonders, because it's easier to document the trend than to figure out how to reverse it yet again?

(Guillory, Ferrell. "An 'alternative universe' required to stifle school resegregation. *The Herald Sun*. June 11, 2017)

And I wonder what has caused this great shift in values in our country?

Have we regressed from a nation that once thought with our frontal cortex about the well-being of all children in that kingdom tree,

to a people who react only with our reptilian brain in anxious ways that fear others, re-enact old errors, and resort to emotionalism over rationalism?

And what is valuable after all? Is it only something we can see and hold now, or is it something that hints at a better future foreseen by all people in general?

Ah, holy Jesus, why is this resegregation of the public schools bothering me so much?

Ah, holy Jesus, maybe I didn't realize the unmeasurable value of what we once had,

until I find that we are now at risk of losing it?

Ah, holy Jesus, why haven't I done more to stem this loss?

To which one of the stories of Jesus speaks to me again; the one

about a socially-suspect merchant, who seeks and finds for a living.

The kingdom of heaven is compared to him, to this bold seeker and finder,

who picks and shuffles through non-kosher oysters until he finds a real gem,

one pearl so fabulous that he is willing to sell all he has to keep it.

The Greek word for pearl is *margarita* – thank you, Jimmy Buffet!

And once this man finds his *margarita*, this object of transcendence and mystery,

he recognizes what for him has true value, and it changes his whole life.

Once he finds his *margarita*, he steps into this alternative reality, this *Margaritaville*,

so to speak, as he recognizes for himself how drastically

he is willing to *reprioritize his life* for this ultimate concern.

And in stepping into this alternative reality, this kingdom view of life,

this man becomes counter-cultural, in abandoning his former identity

as a merchant, and in detaching from all he had previously obtained,

to focus on this singular object of great value to him.

Amy Jill Levin, in her book *Short Stories by Jesus* has this to say about the parable:

“Jesus, the historical Jesus, **cared about prioritizing.**”

In light of the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven,

which is already here as his followers found manifested in his presence

and yet to come as manifested by the full presence of justice,

we are forced to act.

We are forced to determine what we must do to prepare for this new reality.

What do we keep and what do we divest?

How would we live if we knew ultimate judgment was coming on Tuesday?

What are our neighbors' ultimate concerns, and what are ours?

Once we know that material goods will only collect rust or dust, and once we know

that the only thing that counts is treasure in heaven,

surely we must find a new way to live."

(Levin, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 149-50)

In a nutshell, apparently, it's all about *prioritizing* and *reprioritizing*

according to God's alternative reality:

that counter-cultural, kingdom world-view.

It's all about re-ordering our lives according to God's world-view, not ours.

Epilogue: My Own Parable

Once, when my husband and I were driving slowly up a very steep mountain road near Asheville, we came upon a squirrel sitting right in the middle of the road.

And this squirrel had in his possession, a green walnut that was huge, roughly a third the size of his tiny gray body.

And that wiry little squirrel was wrestling with the giant walnut, trying to roll it across a road that sloped precipitously downward, without losing it.

It looked as if this walnut might be great stash for the winter, if only he could finagle it across the road and bury it on the other side.

But as our car came upon the squirrel, he now had a double dilemma:

he could either stay in the road, hold onto the nut, and possibly be run over;
or he could let go of the nut, allow gravity to whisk it down the hill,
while he makes a mad dash off the road to save his life.

The look on his little squirrely face as we slowed to a stop before him told it all.

It conveyed to us *his* solution: "I am not about to let go of this nut.

It means more than life to me. You'll have to run over me

to get it away from me. At risk to my life, I will hold onto this nut!"

And so we did our best to honor his wish, and managed to creep over the squirrel

in our car, without harming either him or his treasure, and we went on our way,
and he on his.

But we laughed as we drove out and down the mountain, and we called

this episode "the squirrel of great price", because this squirrel had

found something so valuable, that he was willing to lose his life for it.

What is of supreme value for you? For what would you sell everything you own?

For what would you re-prioritize life as you know it?

Jesus tells his stories, and asks that we respond with the stories of our own lives.

What is your story? I'd love to hear it. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.